



## Two Characters in Search of a Tragedy

### การตามหาโศกนาฏกรรมของตัวละครเอกในโรเมโอกับจูเลียต

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#### Abstract

Although *Romeo and Juliet* is considered one of Shakespeare's tragedies, because the young lovers die at the end, the fact that they do not tell their parents that they are married weakens the sense of honest conflict necessary in a plot, so it cannot be a genuine tragedy, and their love has to carry the whole story (which it does beautifully). If we think that Romeo and Juliet commit suicide only because of love, that also is not tragic, yet we can find parts of their story that give their characters tragic weight, even though they do not seem to know it themselves or make it explicit in any of their speeches. This article does not, point for point, compare *Romeo and Juliet* with Aristotle's description of tragedy in the *Poetics*; it examines "plot holes" where the conspirators could have told the world what they had done, but did not speak, and it discusses character (the "moral element") and presents a few scenarios that could have made the play more of a tragedy.

**Keywords:** Romeo and Juliet, tragedy, Shakespeare, James Joyce

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### บทคัดย่อ

แม้ว่าโรมีโอและจูเลียตเป็นหนึ่งในบทประพันธ์ที่นำเสนอโศกนาฏกรรมความรักของเชกสเปียร์ เพราะตัวละครเอกทั้งสองจบชีวิตตนเองในตอนท้ายของบทประพันธ์ ความจริงที่ว่าโรมีโอและจูเลียตไม่เปิดเผยความสัมพันธ์ให้ผู้ใหญ่ของทั้งสองฝ่ายรับรู้ได้ลดทอนความขัดแย้งอันแท้จริงซึ่งเป็นส่วนสำคัญในโครงเรื่อง ดังนั้นการตายของทั้งคู่จึงไม่จัดว่าเป็นโศกนาฏกรรมอย่างแท้จริง และผู้ประพันธ์ก็ให้ความรักของโรมีโอและจูเลียตดำเนินเรื่องได้อย่างงดงาม ความคิดที่ว่าโรมีโอและจูเลียตฆ่าตัวตายเพื่อสวามิภักดิ์ความรักนั้นจึงไม่ได้เป็นโศกนาฏกรรมอย่างแท้จริง เพราะในบางตอนของบทประพันธ์ได้แสดงให้เห็นโศกนาฏกรรมของตัวละคร หากแต่ตัวละครเองไม่ได้ตระหนักถึงความเป็นโศกนาฏกรรมของตนเอง บทความนี้จึงศึกษาความไม่สมเหตุสมผลของโครงเรื่องซึ่งผู้ประพันธ์ได้กำหนดให้โรมีโอและจูเลียตเลือกที่จะปิดบังความรักของพวกเขา นอกจากนั้นบางตอนของบทประพันธ์ควรนำเสนอให้เห็นถึงโศกนาฏกรรมอย่างแท้จริงซึ่งตัวละครเอกทั้งสองตัวต้องเผชิญ

**คำสำคัญ:** โรมีโอกับจูเลียต, โศกนาฏกรรม, เชกสเปียร์, เลนส์ จอยซ์



## Introduction

*“For never was a story of more woe*

*Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.”*

The fate of Romeo and Juliet is one of the saddest and most regrettable endings that Shakespeare hands to any of his characters, including Lucrece, Lear, and Antony and Cleopatra. There are few events that are harder to accept than the suicide of a young person, and when two people die for love, “tragic” is probably the first word we would think of. At the risk, however, of appearing heartless toward fictional characters, I would not call *Romeo and Juliet* a real tragedy, one that could be folded into Aristotle’s description of the best Greek tragedies, because there is a massive implausibility at its center: keeping their marriage a secret. From that avoidable sin of omission rapidly flows Mercutio’s death, then Tybalt’s, and from there on, no one on the stage or in the audience has a moment to catch their breath.

When we finally arrive at the Capulet tomb, their suicides do appear to be “fated,”

owing partly to their all-consuming love, and partly to Shakespeare’s numerous insertions of foreshadowing, forebodings, ill omens, and talk of destiny and God’s will. But their deaths are not really *inevitable*, because the plot is not honest enough for a tragedy. In his description of plot (*Poetics*, section 9, trans. by Kenny, 2013), Aristotle includes “necessity”:

*From what has been said it is clear that the poet’s job is not relating what actually happened, but rather the kind of thing that would happen – that is, what is possible in terms of probability and necessity. (p. 28)*

Necessity and honesty mean that all the forces and conflicts in the play come out into the open at suitable points in the action, and characters do their utmost to avoid the inevitable. An honest battle cannot happen until the parents learn the truth and get their rightful chance to thwart the lovers, who would then rightfully resist, to what would finally be a genuinely tragic end.

The four conspirators – Romeo, Juliet, Friar Laurence, and Juliet’s Nurse – could have



done the sensible, normal thing and bravely, heroically gone to face their families, but Shakespeare has them completely forget that mundane chore of informing the newlyweds' parents of the change in their civil status. This is not a charge of cowardice against them; the subject is simply never allowed to surface, so that the only subject we are permitted to think about is love.

While other commentators admit that *Romeo and Juliet* is not in the class of *Lear* and the other tragedies, they do not bring up this implausibility as a reason. Spencer (1967) says that "chance and choice, fate and character . . . may not be adequately united in *Romeo and Juliet*" (p. 18), but without referring to this choice. To explain why Romeo does not tell anyone, Novy (1998, p. 193) says that he is afraid it would make him look less manly to his friends. Brown (2009) comments that, in a modern setting, Juliet's not running away with Romeo "has proved a continual stumbling block in the credibility of the plot" (p. 143). True, yet still no mention of their not

telling the parents.

If we look at the plot objectively, we have to say that not telling the parents is a serious weakness in the story, a recipe for disaster, not tragedy. However, it is not the aim here to pick a squabble with Shakespeare as a writer or claim that he did not know how to be honest, as if he should have written a real tragedy but squandered his ink on a sentimental melodrama (and *Romeo and Juliet* is definitely not that, either). By taking a look at what is not there, this paper offers yet another view of how the play works and attempts a straightforward explanation as to why it is not quite a tragedy, and we will later look at what Romeo and Juliet do that finally gives them some right to be considered tragic characters.

### **Plot Holes and Fault Lines**

From a plot consideration, getting married secretly is not a problem. The problem is that even the possibility of telling the happy bride and groom's parents never sees the light of day,



and we never hear one reason for not going to them, either. Since there is no discussion before or after the wedding about speaking to them, it would be easy to think that they got cold feet, a sudden case of “If our parents find out, they’ll kill us!” but there is no hint of that in anything they say or do, and in a love story, it is much more likely that they were so joyous and hopeful in their new love that they assumed that everything would turn out wonderfully.

In only one brief moment do the main protagonists seem to be aware of a responsibility toward their parents. That moment occurs with Juliet, after her mother eloquently makes her case for marrying the worthy, “valiant Paris” in Act I, scene 3. Juliet reassures her that she will be obedient in considering her parents’ choice for her and will not “endart” her eye at anyone they would not approve of:

*I’ll look to like, if looking liking move.*

*But no more deep will I endart mine eye  
Than your consent gives strength to  
make it fly. (lines 98-100)*

Her obedience is as sincere as it is brief, because she soon finds the strength to endart her eye at Romeo, and deeply.

The only time the feelings of the families are considered is at the end of Act II, scene 3, when Friar Laurence tells Romeo that he will marry them:

*In one respect I’ll thy assistant be.*

*For this alliance may so happy prove*

*To turn your households’ rancour to pure love.*

*(85-87)*

It is Juliet who first says she wants to marry, in II.2, but nothing about informing anyone:

*Three words, dear Romeo, and good night indeed.*

*If that thy bent of love be honourable,*

*Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow,*

*By one that I’ll procure to come to thee,*

*Where and what time thou wilt perform the rite,*

*And all my fortunes at thy foot I’ll lay*

*And follow thee my lord throughout the world.*

*(142-148)*

In II.4, Romeo and Juliet’s Nurse plan Juliet’s visit to Friar Laurence’s cell for the



ceremony, and she does not raise any concerns for what her employers might think, only for Juliet's happiness. When the Nurse tells Juliet the plan, in II.5, once again neither one asks, "So . . . when are we going to tell my/ your mother and father?" – though there is an odd train of thought going on in the Nurse, who answers Juliet's question about Romeo and suddenly asks where her mother is:

NURSE

*Your love says, like an honest gentleman, and courteous, and a kind, and a handsome, and, I warrant, a virtuous – Where is your mother?*

JULIET

*Where is my mother? Why, she is within.  
Where should she be? How oddly thou repliest!  
'Your love says, like an honest gentleman,  
'Where is your mother?''*

NURSE

*O God's Lady dear!  
Are you so hot? Marry come up, I trow.  
Is this the poultice for my aching bones?  
Henceforward do your messages yourself.  
(55-64)*

The Nurse may be experiencing a pang of guilt or worry, but Juliet's heated, vexed rebuke seems to derail her. The Nurse's asking "Are you so hot?" is a stage direction in the old style; it tells the actress playing Juliet that she does not have the choice of speaking with mere curiosity or teasingly. She has to make her Nurse upset and thus keep the complications in play.

Even in the next scene, in the long, distraught conference between Romeo, the Friar, and the Nurse, among all their desperate plans is not one mention of trying to straighten everything out with a little bit of owning up to what they did, beyond the Friar's advice that Romeo accept his exile in Mantua:

*Where thou shalt live till we can find a time  
To blaze your marriage, reconcile your friends,  
Beg pardon of the Prince, and call thee back  
With twenty hundred thousand times more joy  
Than thou wentest forth in lamentation.  
(150-154)*

Among all the sayings that Shakespeare is credited with bringing us, "There's no time



like the present” appears not to be one of them. (In fact, according to Dictionary.com, it is an adage that was first used in 1562, by an unknown writer.)

When Juliet comes to the Friar in Act IV, sc. 1, looking for a way out of the marriage with Paris, Shakespeare uses all his dramatic talent to keep us glued to our seats. The Friar offers a complicated, dangerous scheme – having her drink a potion to appear dead and sending a message to Romeo in Mantua – rather than say, “I think it’s time we both went for confession . . . to your parents.”

Friar Laurence frequently warns against rushing into things, but he does not have anything to say about the folly of postponing the inevitable by avoiding one’s responsibility. He has some of the longest speeches in the play, filled with wisdom and sincerity, no pious humbug, so, in the usage of today’s political scene, he is “the adult in the room,” yet the Author will not let him fulfill his destiny as the one person who could save our lovers from themselves. (Friar Laurence could

be a third character looking for a tragedy.)

In the above scenes, Shakespeare keeps the protagonists from talking about going to the parents, but in two other scenes, he gives them each an opportunity to say something, and then snatches it away. The first chance we see comes when Romeo and Mercutio are at the point of Tybalt’s sword, which can either freeze the tongue or loosen it; Romeo manages only to hint that he and Tybalt have no cause to quarrel:

ROMEO

*I do protest I never injured thee,  
But love thee better than thou canst devise  
Till thou shalt know the reason of my love.  
(III.1, 67-69)*

But words like “reason” and “love” are not going to stop him.

Juliet’s chance to come clean with her family occurs in Act III, sc. 5, the scene in which her father furiously demands that she marry the County Paris. His insulting harangue is punctuated with pleas by Juliet and then by the Nurse for him to listen to them:



JULIET

*Good father, I beseech you on my knees,  
Hear me with patience but to speak a word.  
(158-159)*

Her words have as little effect as Romeo's appeal to Tybalt and make Capulet double his curses. Juliet may have been able to summon up the courage to tell the truth if he were merely telling her his decision, but such a torrent of venom would wash away any attempt to stand against it, so it was very likely the Author's intention to stun Juliet (and the audience) into submission. (This moment is also an excellent, early example of a common convention, almost a cliché, on stage and screen, which does not permit a good guy to answer back to a villain who raises his voice or says anything particularly cutting or clever.)

Finally, during the reckoning in the tomb, Friar Laurence tells the whole sorry tale and accepts punishment "if aught in this / Miscarried by my fault" (lines 276-277), but does not admit that he should have told anyone

sooner. It is the last chance for Shakespeare to let one of the remaining conspirators apologize for the mistake or to have the parents ask why they had not been told, but his fixation on the theme of love is unbreakable.

### **Becoming a Tragic Character**

After plot, Aristotle considers character the second most important element in drama. In his translation of the *Poetics* (2013), Kenny calls it the "moral element" (p. xix) and "moral character" (p. 25), which makes good sense, since what we notice in characters is the way they think and feel and act, their moral natures. In a tragedy we expect someone not simply to suffer but to be heroic and do the best and most moral thing, in the face of fate or society or their own flaws. They do what they honestly believe is right, but the gods (in the person of the author) will not let them win, or even escape. So, since the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* lacks tragic inevitability, we can still try to find heroism in Romeo and Juliet's deeds, even though, judging from the many missed





chances discussed above, their heroism is not obvious.

At the beginning of Act V, when Romeo hears that Juliet has died, he raises his fist against Fate: "Is it e'en so? Then I defy you, stars!" (line 24). But it is the parents he should have defied, long before it got to this point. Nevertheless, this is where Romeo's character starts to approach tragic stature. He first feels the touch of Fate's cold hand when Mercutio dies: "O, I am fortune's fool!" (III.1, 36). However, in his scene with the Friar and the Nurse, he is not heroic at all, in the Friar's opinion. Also, the wedding night scene (Act III, sc. 5), with all its premonitions of doom, is still merely drama, only the warming up of the oven before the cooking of the goose.

When it comes to their final decision to die, what is more important than their forebodings is the weight of everything that has happened to them in the past four days. There are burdens weighing on them that they do not express, yet we can easily find them, if we think like actors. Lovers who are

worth acting will have something more substantial than just love on their minds when they take their lives.

For Romeo, Juliet's death is more than the loss of his true love. He must realize that he is responsible. If he had not pursued her, her innocence would still be alive, despite the fact that some directors and actresses consider her not so innocent: "Juliets have become more sexually aware" (Brown, 2009, p. 142). Her death is no doubt the worst weight he feels, more than his guilt over the death of Mercutio and the killing of Tybalt. A man like him does not deserve to love again, he might think. And he will have one more murder on his conscience when he kills Paris, not knowing at first who he is. Four deaths in four days would break anyone.

Romeo does not say anywhere that these are the reasons he wants to or has to die, and in the rush of a performance, an audience is paying attention only to the action in front of them, so it appears he kills himself out of crushing sadness for the loss



of his true love, but that is not enough to make his case a tragic one. It would have to be his accepting responsibility for all these deaths, and paying with his own life, that would finally make him a tragic figure. Full awareness of guilt makes a much stronger case than love for a tragic suicide. We do not see him become aware, so we do not have a way to unite with his deeper suffering at any particular moment, but an actor playing Romeo might be able to hint at awareness in the spaces between the words.

Juliet's death is more complicated. She is not responsible for any murders and has not harmed anyone. But when she wakes up in a tomb with two fresh corpses, she must know that her life in the family and in society is at an end; these are more concrete forebodings than her earlier fears are.

Her hopelessness can be tragic, not a weakness, if she honestly faces everything that has brought her to this point and decides on an action, even knowing that there is no hope for her. After the argument with her

father, she starts to recognize death as the path she might have to take, because she feels as if her own family has rejected her, and even her Nurse tells her that she will simply have to forget about Romeo. If she were living a normal life, her anguish could be considered an adolescent over-reaction and she would eventually get over it, but nothing is normal anymore. With Friar Laurence, she talks of wanting to die rather than marry Paris, and very bravely agrees to become "a borrowed likeness of shrunk death" (IV.1, 104). Just before taking his potion, in IV. 3, she wonders what will happen to her, and worries that the Friar may want to poison her, to cover his mistake. She takes it anyway, so she is certainly ready to accept the risk of dying – which makes this her first death, and some of the reasons given in the next paragraph could apply here, and move her into the tragic.

As with Romeo, we do not see a moment in which she expresses what is compelling her to choose death, but the



bodies of two men who loved her would make her feel responsible, and feel that there is no love left for her anywhere in this world. If she returns to her family, she will be only a stain on the family reputation, no matter how much forgiveness they have for her (and, after their last moments together, forgiveness from either parent is impossible for her to imagine). Being sent to a convent would be a strong possibility. Or if they were to force her to marry someone from another city, to put her out of sight, she might end up in as loveless a situation as her mother seems to be in, and no doubt many of the marriages she would have known. (Wrong or not, it is still a valid element in her reaction.) So a large part of what could be racing through her subconscious is similar to what Cleopatra sees in her future if she were taken to Rome as a prisoner, nothing but humiliation and misery. Cleopatra has plenty of time to tell us what is going on in her mind. Juliet has hardly a dozen lines, which are spent mostly trying to find Romeo's poison and then quickly stabbing herself before

someone enters, yet an actress who understands what might be going through her mind would be able to give her enough tragic weight that it does not feel rushed.

The reason for making awareness important for a tragic character is tied to a passage in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, by James Joyce, where Stephen Dedalus tells his friend Lynch, "Pity is the feeling that arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer"; terror does the same and "unites [the mind] with the secret cause" (p. 204). Out of Aristotle's two essential tragic emotions, pity is definitely the more important one in *Romeo and Juliet*. Most of us would consider guilt and hopelessness two things that are "grave and constant in human sufferings." Even though we already have sympathy for them and feel their deaths as a terribly sad moment, Romeo's suffering would have more meaning if he had told us about his guilt over Juliet's death, and if we could also see Juliet's



loveless, blighted future in her own words, we would know that they have been honest with themselves and with us. When a writer presents the moral element – the moral thinking and awareness of the characters – the tragedy becomes tangible, because we know the truth of what they are going through. Moments of clarity like these can arrest our minds with their significance. In this way, the “moral element” would be able to carry the tragedy even when the Author performs some sleight of hand with the plot.

#### **The Tragedy that “Could Have Been”**

If our lovers had in fact told their families about their marriage on that day, it might have had the opposite effect they had hoped for and even intensified the family feud, so much of the play could still have happened as it is written. Tybalt could attack Mercutio and Romeo, because the marriage is an insult to the Capulets and he cannot stop hating him, and still be killed, and Romeo exiled. Alternatively, supposing that the newlyweds

had not told their parents before Romeo and Tybalt dueled, Romeo could then have told the Prince about their marriage and begged not to be sent into exile (or the Friar could have, or Romeo could have asked his father to speak to the Prince).

He may have been exiled anyway, but, as his wife, Juliet could have gone with him, which would make a short play, or no play at all – unless her parents took her from him, the foul corruptor, and tried to banish her to a convent, after having the marriage annulled, and then the play could have continued with the plot to feign death, but probably without Paris. Paris may not have wanted to court her anymore, nor would anyone in Verona. On the other hand, Paris may love her enough to try to win her hand again, so he could become a genuine rival to Romeo, off in Mantua, with equally passionate, tender lines, though Juliet would still love Romeo more. So the story would continue, and Paris would fall to Romeo in the Capulet tomb.



## Conclusion

Shakespeare found an unusual story and two characters who stirred his imagination in the long narrative poem by Arthur Brooke *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, and he turned it into one of the most dramatic, beautiful, tormented love stories we have ever had. Had he been willing to do so, he may have been able to weave in some lines that bring up the possibility of going to their families with the glad tidings, but he had the inspiration to keep the real world out and to make his story as much as possible about the beauty and excitement and fever and agony of young love. It is hard to argue with Elizabeth I's

verdict (that is, Dame Judi Dench, at the end of *Shakespeare in Love*) that the play does show “the very truth and nature of love.”

And if Romeo and Juliet had followed through with the talk about revealing all to their parents, it would begin to turn the drama into a more complicated and more profound story, just waiting for two arresting characters to make it a full-blown tragedy. The play we have, however, is a marvelous vehicle for their characters and nothing for them to be ashamed of starring in. But we should not be surprised if they are not quite satisfied yet and are looking for a story somewhere that will bring out their full tragic potential.



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