

ON RE-READING SHAKESPEARE'S 'ROMEO AND JULIET'

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To re-read Shakespeare is like returning to a great city and discovering afresh the splendour of its palaces and art. It matters not that other big cities have been visited in the interval; the new beauties only serve to confirm the supremacy of the old. Even Time does not damage its fame for it more than holds its own against the higher standards that come with the years.

Whether judged in respect of craftsmanship or of poetry or of drama or of characterization *Romeo and Juliet* leaves an impressive sense of achievement which is thrown into bolder relief by the knowledge that it was one of Shakespeare's early plays—though not his first, as Hazlitt would have us believe! Indeed, its early date cannot escape the perception of a reader who is familiar with other plays of Shakespeare, especially those which have certain features of style in common with it. One of the pleasures of re-reading Shakespeare, in fact, is to arrive at some estimate of the chronology of his plays through similarities and dissimilarities in their style.

Romeo and Juliet's lyricism and rhyme remind one of *Richard II*, its parallelisms and compound adjectives of *Richard III* and its antitheses of the sonnets. It is a work so unmistakably of the Renaissance in its style and romanticism and yet it bears the mark of mediaevalism in some of the ideas which Shakespeare incorporated in the play. To read of Fate which is spoken of as Fortune, or of the courtly love with which Romeo is first afflicted, or of the theory of 'humours' in which the characters implicitly believe is to be reminded of the continuity between the old world and the new in certain ideas prevalent in Shakespeare's time.

This observation may come as a slight surprise because Shakespeare is so typically a writer of the Renaissance in his versatility, in his power of doing things on a large scale, in the fecundity of his inventiveness, and in the colour and vitality of his imagery, but he was also a representative Elizabethan writer and as such he could not but reflect the many mediaeval beliefs and traditions which survived among his contemporaries. His audience, however Protestant, still uttered such oaths and adjurations as 'Marry', 'Byr Lady', 'Sblood', 'Mass', 'by the rood', which they heard, with strict realism, on the lips of his characters.

In this, as in other things, *Romeo and Juliet*, like Shakespeare's other

plays, is so English, however Italian may be its story and setting. Its Englishness is conveyed to the reader by the puns and quibbles—the hallmarks of Elizabethan wit—which are heard on the stage even before the action is launched. No wonder so comic a character as the Nurse seems no incongruity—on the contrary, so natural a creation—in a tragic story of two lovers hounded to death by Fate. Being English, she seems to hold her position in the play by right and in defiance of the classical rules which were drawn from art not from Nature. She seems so unmistakable a cousin of Chaucer's Wife of Bath and so promising a forerunner of the great comic characters that followed in Shakespeare's other plays. So native is she to an English brain that one understands why Dr Johnson proclaimed that Shakespeare had an easier genius for comedy than for tragedy.

Irrespective of whether Johnson was right or wrong, what seems certain is that Shakespeare's audience expected comedy so often, even in a tragedy like *Romeo and Juliet*, and, as is proved by the comic interludes in this play, he was certainly not the man to disappoint them. It is difficult—and for the student of English foolish—to detach Shakespeare from his times. He is so much of his age in spite of Ben Jonson's prophecy that he was for all time. To re-read a play like *Romeo and Juliet* is to be reminded of his stage in scene after scene and to have one's attention—and admiration—focused on his craftsmanship in the light of what the stage historians have discovered about his theatre.

In this task a reading of the text must be supplemented by imagination which can visualize the action as it probably took place on his stage for which the plays were originally written. His technique is then revealed in full, especially in the last two acts of *Romeo and Juliet* which show how much he had the peculiar features of the Elizabethan theatre—outer and inner stage, curtain, balcony, etc.—in mind when writing the play. In this light he emerges as dramatic to his finger tips and as the exemplar of technical qualities which must surely be missed by those teachers—and they are many—who do not consider the stage at all when reading or lecturing on his plays.

Indeed, they are not alone; even the old critics, Johnson and Hazlitt among them, ignored this aspect with the result that their criticism, however valuable, is incomplete and has to be supplemented by the observations of later critics, Granville-Barker among them, who had the benefit of Victorian and modern research into the history of the theatre and the production of Shakespeare's plays. Equipped with this knowledge one can then join battle with those pundits who would rather read Shakespeare than see him acted.

The text itself seems to pulsate with action, so much so that the reader on encountering a long speech like that of Mercutio about Queen Mab seems to be taken by surprise at finding Shakespeare holding up the action in order to put a long, magnificently poetic, but undramatic, speech in the mouth of one of his most brilliant characters.

It is, of course, pleasing to subscribe to the fancy that Mercutio — wit, poet, satirist, man of the world, brilliant talker — was to some extent a mirror of the young Shakespeare himself when he wrote *Romeo and Juliet* just as it is intriguing to wonder how much Hamlet is an image of the later Shakespeare when he was in no mood to relish the humour he had given to Mercutio. To generalize about Shakespeare the man from single characters is as dangerous as to infer that he was 'the poet of Nature' from the naturalness of his comic characters or to argue, on the contrary, that he was romantic and not realistic on the evidence of his plots or the doings and utterances of characters like Romeo and Juliet.

Certainly these two lovers belong out and out to romance and they remind the reader that the twentieth century, accustomed as it is to 'super-realism' on stage and screen, does not go all the way with the eighteenth century view, as expressed by Dr Johnson, that Shakespeare was the poet of Nature. It is good, in fact, that Johnson's phrase lays stress on 'poet' as well as on 'nature' because undoubtedly in Shakespeare the poetic is really inseparable from the natural or the dramatic and it is often not easy to tell which has the upper hand. It is not difficult to show that Romeo and Juliet in the last two acts of the play are eminently dramatic in spite of the poetic conception of their story or the poetic language in which they play out their tragedy just as it is easy to prove that they are more poetic than dramatic in the opening scenes of the play. It is likewise very easy to prove that Shakespeare is as 'natural' as any modern writer if the Nurse or Mercutio only are taken into account. What is certain is that all these characters are the product of the imagination and as such they will inevitably not correspond absolutely to reality when taken out of the theatre for which they were created.

Admittedly had he written *Romeo and Juliet* later than he did, he would probably have shed some, if not all, of the rhymed dialogue which gives a few of the scenes such as Romeo's confession of love to Friar Lawrence a rather artificial touch. But the whole conception of Romeo as the courtly lover moping for Rosaline is artificial in the extreme and only shows Shakespeare's dependence on his source, Arthur Brooke's poem, which was itself dependent essentially on a long-established mediaeval convention.

As the courtly lover what impresses in Romeo is not naturalness but

the verbal resourcefulness of Shakespeare which in its turns of words and balanced antitheses recalls the facile technique of the sonnets. The danger of all this word-play is obvious. Shakespeare runs the risk of making all his characters, or almost all, at some moment or other Elizabethan 'wits'. It cannot be affirmed that he avoided this pitfall altogether; indeed, it is distressing to see him plunging into it in certain vital passages of the play, as when Romeo on hearing of his banishment can only express his hysterical sorrow by means of a cheap pun—a lapse into which Juliet also falls when the Nurse brings her the news of Tybalt's death and Romeo's exile.

Indeed, it is not hard to understand why these verbal extravagances—and with them may be included the extreme examples of his loved 'conceits'—drew upon him the sharp, though perhaps exaggerated, criticism of classical scholars like Ben Jonson, Samuel Johnson and A.E. Housman. So fantastic a line as that in *Romeo and Juliet* describing the sheath of a dagger as 'his house' tempts the reader to wish that Shakespeare had blotted, if not a thousand, at least some lines.

Apparently these infelicities are of a piece with the astonishing verbal virtuosity of which he had become master by the time he wrote *Romeo and Juliet*; indeed, they are more than redeemed by phrases and lines which may be quoted as models of the most felicitous expression. To clothe an abstract scene or idea with a graphic, concrete image seems to be for him the easiest of labours and this facility of his throws his occasional lapses into bolder relief. He has perfect touch at his best but not absolute sureness.

Again, he reveals some lack of sureness in his handling of the Prologue who disappears altogether after giving an unnecessary explanation at the beginning of the second act. It is significant for purposes of chronology that the two speeches of the Prologue are in sonnet form and contain, in fact, all the principal stylistic and metrical features of Shakespeare's sonnet sequence.

Metrically, it is perhaps the blank verse that impresses more than the rhyme, for the former is splendidly controlled and modulated, especially in the more dramatic and passionate scenes where the metre is inextricably connected with the drama. One scene that comes to mind in proof of this is the outburst of Capulet on hearing of his daughter's refusal to marry Paris. The decasyllabic line becomes in Shakespeare's hands a perfect instrument for the display of 'the fluctuations of passion', in Hazlitt's memorable phrase.

The abusive language of the tyrannical Capulet recalls the massive vituperation of *Richard III* and affords further proof of the 'prodigious

vocabulary' of Shakespeare who could in one and the same play put the mildest as well as the most offensive language on the lips of his characters.

However, it is not always easy for the general reader to understand the language of Shakespeare because many of his words, phrases and idioms have become obsolete or have undergone radical changes of meaning. It is becoming increasingly necessary for the non-philologist to keep a glossary handy for a proper understanding of Shakespeare and it is perhaps not fanciful to imagine a scholar in the not too distant future trying to 'render' Shakespeare in the modern idiom, as scriptural scholars have been driven to do in order to keep the bible intelligible!

It cannot be said that Shakespeare has not been tampered with for, apart from textual corruption and emendation which constitute a perennial problem, he has been pretty badly mutilated by school editors for the sake of 'respectability'. Certainly they can congratulate themselves on having succeeded in making Shakespeare look remarkably 'clean' to generations of pupils only a minority of whom learn, usually on going to a university, of the smutty jokes in which almost every play of his abounds. There is proof of this in the opening scenes of this play in the verbal exchanges of the servants, and, indeed, more of it in Mercutio who would not have been a representative Elizabethan wit without his bawdry.

To plead, as Robert Bridges did, that Shakespeare was made to write bawdry by his audience is to suggest that he had no taste for it, but all the evidence of his thirty-six plays is against this suggestion. It is more reasonable to believe that bawdry was one of the chief features of popular theatrical entertainment as licentiousness of another kind was the staple ingredient of Restoration Comedy, and that Shakespeare catered for it in the same way that he catered for high and eminently respectable intellectual and spiritual demands.

In *Romeo and Juliet* he seems to be exploiting the theme of love triumphant to which he was to return in middle age in *Antony and Cleopatra*, but there is no real suggestion of tragedy in the latter, as there is in the former; nor are there recurrent allusions to Fate in the later play, as there are in the earlier. The young lovers of Verona may be rash, impetuous and secretive and as such responsible to some extent for their doom but it was obviously Shakespeare's intention to exonerate them from responsibility and to represent them, in the opening words of the Prologue, as 'star-crossed'. In this light *Romeo and Juliet* is not a typically Shakesperian tragedy in the sense that *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* is, for in the later tragedies it is Responsibility that is stressed more than Fatality.

Yet there are some who see a resemblance to Hamlet in the character of

Romeo, presumably in the analytical, introspective bent of the young lover who throws off, like Hamlet, though to a less marked extent, brooding observations on his own feelings and those of others. But Hamlet has a far more complex character than Romeo and is also very different in several qualities. There is no sign in Romeo of Hamlet's incessant self-reproach or of a morbid self-examination which paralyses action; on the contrary, Romeo, like Juliet, acts with striking speed, especially in the dramatic scene before the catastrophe when his servant brings to Mantua the news of Juliet's reported death.

Indeed, the impetuous fervour of the lovers accelerates the action of the play which is unfolded by Shakespeare in a strict and tightly constructed sequence of quick-moving events. The tempo rises after the secret marriage and the whole tragedy is played out in a handful of days. There is no sub-plot, as in some of Shakespeare's plays, to slow down the main action so that the followers of classical practice cannot complain that Shakespeare violates Aristotle's rule on the unity of action.

They may, with some reason, point to the incongruity of the English names and nicknames which he gave to the servants in a play which is laid in Italy and which has Italian names for most of its principal characters, but this only confirms the Englishness of Shakespeare's comic characters as well as his historic indifference to small details of geography and history.

He was careful enough, however, to make Mercutio joke about Romeo's 'French slop' and to include an allusion to a 'doublet' so that, taking three hints about costume into account as well as the 'masque' in Capulet's house, a producer would be justified in dressing the play in the costume of the Renaissance and not of the Middle Ages.

Certainly he would do well to choose an actor and an actress for the parts of Romeo and Juliet who can not only act but also speak verse since many of their lines, especially in the balcony scenes, are so obviously written for declamation that they would be spoilt without proper attention to balance and rhythm. In Juliet's case the actress, if she is to be faithful to Shakespeare's conception of the part, must convey to the audience a clear idea of her highly imaginative nature both at lyrical moments, as on the night after the secret marriage, and in dramatic situations, as in the scene when she whips herself up to a state of horror before drinking the potion.

The relationship between Juliet and the Nurse is itself another medieval touch in the sense that it derives ultimately from those common figures of old romances, namely, the young lady of noble birth and her elderly companion. It is a reminder of Shakespeare's rehandling of old

material and, in the case of plays like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Twelfth Night* and *Much ado about Nothing*, of his debt to the Italian romancers of the early Renaissance, notably Matteo Bandello, whose stories contain some of the features and characters of the earlier tales. Indeed, the Nurse and Juliet are not an isolated instance of this relationship in Shakespeare; their prototypes, however shadowy by comparison, had already appeared in his first plays.

It is perhaps possible to visualize a boy-actor playing Juliet, as was done in Shakespeare's time when women were not allowed on the stage, but it was a man presumably rather than a boy who played the part of the Nurse whom Shakespeare seems to have conceived as certainly middle-aged, if not as old as she is sometimes represented on the stage. On the other hand, the parts of the male low characters, being so Elizabethan in conception and dialogue, still seem to have been written expressly for Shakespeare's contemporary actors, especially the part of Peter who is obviously the Fool in *Romeo and Juliet* and who, according to the scholars, was played by the popular comedian William Kempe, one of the prominent members of Shakespeare's company. He must have brought to the audience not only laughter but also a very familiar English touch with his snatches of songs, which are almost invariably omitted from modern productions.

It is good that neither he nor Mercutio have too many of those topical allusions common enough in Shakespeare's plays but completely unintelligible to the modern reader. However, it is still possible to visualize how effective they must have been on his stage because they often served not only for broad or sophisticated comedy but also for satire aimed at contemporary customs, characters and foibles which fell within the range of Shakespeare's sharp eyes. A touch of this is provided by Mercutio in his scathing remarks about the affectations of Tybalt whose French and technical terms must obviously have meant far more to Shakespeare's audience than to the modern reader.

Yet it is clear that even in these topical allusions Shakespeare was comprehensive enough to appeal to both the vulgar and sophisticated members of his audience who could not charge him with writing 'sectional drama' or with being, like Lyly, a playwright for the court or, like Ben Jonson, a playwright for scholars. It is a measure of Shakespeare's universality that a play like *Romeo and Juliet*, which had wide appeal when it was first acted, still continues to draw crowds not only in England but also in many parts of the world and this not only on the stage but also on the Screen.