

Die literarische Konfliktanalyse

William Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet

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Der Schwerpunkt der literarischen Konfliktanalyse, die im englischen Original erscheint, liegt diesmal nicht auf der direkten Nutzbarmachung eines exemplarischen Konflikts innerhalb eines Werks, sondern die gesamte Tragödie wird als Konflikt funktionalisiert und anschließend im Sinne eines Gedankenexperiments neutralisiert.

A.C. Whelan hat sich der Tragödie von Romeo und Julia aus dem Blickwinkel eines Künstlers und nicht aus dem eines Mediators genähert. Folglich stand für ihn die literarische Textarbeit mit der Leitfrage im Vordergrund: Wie muss man in den Text intervenieren, um den literarischen Konflikt zu extrahieren und somit die Tragödie im Keim zu ersticken, ohne die vorgegebenen Charaktere und Handlungsstränge des Stücks zu verändern? Das Ergebnis: Eine neue Sichtweise auf klassische Literatur und eine anregende Übung und alternative Form, über Konflikte nachzudenken.

We must kill the play. We must rip it off its axis, re-prioritize the characters accordingly, and destroy all the poetry, the very sum and substance, of the work its author intended. For our task is to *de-fictionalize* a work of fiction, in order to make “realistic” assessments of its wholly imaginary characters and situations, and to then *re-fictionalize* a plot in order to resolve the literary conflict. And to accomplish this, we are to assume the role *not* of omniscient mediator, but of the play’s “writer / director”. We must make initial key decisions (i. e., our “take” on the play), from which all subsequent decisions will follow. We must then “cast” our “characters” to embody a “psychology” and “motivation” that we’ll conjecture, sometimes with far too little help from the author, supported by the assumed inner-logic of his characterizations, and our own. Finally, we will become “actors” ourselves, secrete “characters” in this *anti-play*, whose unseen “role” is to somehow implement our new “scena-

rio”, crossing in and out of fiction as if it were simply a curtain onstage. Yet, we must also be invisible, like spies. Like ghosts. We must look through closed doors, read “people’s” minds, but all the while, we are never “antagonists”. On the contrary, we are motivated by a moral certainty that this conflict is not intractable, and that the death and destruction of our fellow characters must and can be avoided. We must kill the play for the sake of peace and preserving human life. This is our one and only imperative, and we must remain hard and steadfast to it.

Therefore, this is not a ‘love story’. It is not a tale of doomed passion and innocent youth “nipped in the bud” by the ignorance of misguided adults. If it were – that is, if Romeo and Juliet were our principle “actors” – then they would be the obvious protractors of our conflict. Sadly, the opposite is true. It is their ‘love story’ which tragically *ends* it. They are its victims.

No. Our *primary* conflict is described by the author only as an “ancient grudge” between “two houses” and its principle ‘actors’ are now two wealthy (and very foolish) old men. This is all we are told of it, this feud, and can assume it has existed for at least as long as its current adversaries, if not longer. However, neither Montague nor Capulet are aware of its seriousness until it is too late. On the very first night of the play’s action, events will be put into motion that spin suddenly out of control, bringing their grudge to an ugly head only five short days later, leaving six victims dead in its wake, and the conflict tragically “resolved” (by default). Before that fatal moment, their feud is a badge of pride, a mark of identity, perhaps even a source of competitive wealth and power for at least one of the two houses, however “*both alike in dignity*” they may be. We are pressed for time, and cannot depend upon the situational awareness of the conflicting parties, for their willingness to enter some *voluntary* resolution process. A strategy to end this age-old feud cannot itself be the only goal of our scenario. First, we must prevent the deaths of six individuals. What we must “orchestrate” is an immediate intervention!



There is a third actor in our conflict.

He is, perhaps, the most pivotal, and one whose role becomes clearer through a dramaturgical mystery in the opening scene. But we must first set the play to uncover it. *Romeo and Juliet* can be – and has been – set at any time, but as we are only now beginning to explore it, we will stick as close to “a classic interpretation” as we can, if only to give clear context to our destruction of it. We will say the action takes place from Sunday morning, July 15, through Thursday night into Friday morning, July 19–20, 1359. If, as we assume, the Prince, Escalus, is the ruling power of Verona, then we at least know it is set prior to 1405, when the Devotion to Venice was signed, replacing the Prince as ultimate authority. But then, too, as per the Nurse, it is now 11 years since the Friuli Earthquake (1348), the greatest and most well-documented natural disaster in Medieval Europe (of which the Elizabethans would surely have known, enamored as they were of all things Italian as the center of European culture at the time). Lastly, according to Lady Capulet, we are a “*fortnight and odd days*” from Lammas-tide on August 1. Now, after putting an angry end to the fighting, Escalus warns:

If ever you disturb our streets again,
Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace!
(Verstört ihr jemals wieder unsre Stadt
So zahl' eur Leben mit den Friedensbruch.)*

This is a clear and concise admonition, and nothing more need be said. But then he adds:

You Capulet, shall go along with me
And Montague, come you this afternoon,
To know our further pleasure in this case.
(Ihr aber, Capulet, sollt mich begleiten.
Ihr, Montague, kommt diesen Nachmittag
Und hört, was hierin fürder mir bleibt.)

We are never told all of what was spoken (Capulet recounts only a bit of it to Paris, but the moment is private, secretive. What is it he chooses to (first) discuss with Capulet on their walk, that he might later say to Montague (or not) in Court? What exactly is his relationship to our protagonists? As he appears in only three scenes, with no personal information given by the author, other than he is kin to Paris and Mercutio, we need to “flesh-out his character”. For example, we know – typical of the 14th century Italian city-state – that his rule was most likely dynastic, and his wealth and power strengthened through his ties to the burgher class. How old is he? Let us cast him as more of a contemporary to our protagonists than to the younger characters, if only to delineate more clearly the age-related line of authority that separates the generations here; that,

and to explain his laxity in the matter of the feud, for he will admit at play's end:

And I for winking at your discords too
Have lost a brace of kinsmen!
(Auch ich, weil ich dem Zwiespalt nachgesehn,
Verlor ein Paar Verwandte.)

His earlier threat of execution was obviously, then, not in earnest. It was said for dramatic effect, to clear the streets of trouble and to convince the general population of his control (we must not forget that the citizens of Verona were up in arms in Act 1):

Clubs, bills, and partisans! Strike! Beat them down!
Down with the Capulets! Down with the Montagues!
(He! Spies' und Stangen her! Schlacht auf sie los!
Weg mit den Capulets! Weg mit den Montagues!)

So we can now decide that it is Escalus who has arranged the marriage between Paris and Juliet, in order to strengthen his hold; and as he is old (we have no knowledge of any princely children), he wishes to secure succession. Making sure that all is in place for that evening, the Prince advises Capulet to not make it too easy for the Count at their meeting that afternoon, for the young man is too arrogant. And thus our conflict becomes crucially asymmetrical. Montague has less to offer the Prince, but is no less a valuable member of his class. Escalus cannot afford to alienate him in any way, thus he is careful not to let his plans be known, but may offer a bit of business to Montague instead. Verona was an important point on the trade route along the Adige, and the Prince would have commanded a great fleet of ships. Let us make Montague a maker of sails (and Capulet a merchant in wood).



There are obstacles.

We are encouraged to think an eventual resolution may be possible, having no reason to doubt Capulet when he recounts to Paris:

But Montague is bound as well as I
In penalty alike, and 'tis not hard, I think,
For men so old as we to keep the peace.
(Und Montague ist mit derselben Buße
Wie ich bedroht? Für Greise, wie wir sind,
Ist Frieden halten, denk ich, nicht so schwer.)

But neither can we doubt Tybalt when he hisses at Benvolio:

What, drawn, and talk of peace? I hate the word,
As I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee!
(Was? Ziehn und Friede rufen? Wie die Hölle
Haß ich das Wort, wie alle Montagues. Und dich!)

Not a Capulet by birth, but the son of Lady Capulet's brother, Tybalt has a streak for revenge far deeper than familial honor. His unmitigated rage will bring about the play's first death, and his own (on the very next day), and all because a Montague attends the Capulet ball, at which even Lord Capulet himself takes no offense, leaving Tybalt to mutter:

Patience perforce with wilful choler meeting
Makes my flesh tremble in their different greeting.
I will withdraw, but this intrusion shall,
Now seeming sweet, convert to bitt' rest gall.
(Mir kämpft Geduld aus Zwang mit willger Wut
Im Innern und empört mein siedend Blut.
Ich gehe: doch so frech sich aufzudringen,
Was Lust ihm macht, soll bitter Lohn ihm bringen.)

His uncontrollable anger, his disregard for (even Lord Capulet's) authority, and his aggressiveness are beyond reason, blinding, reckless. He is a "loose canon", untrustworthy, and thus a threat to whatever peaceful settlement might ever be achieved. The greater obstacle, however, is Romeo himself. Kill the play. We must be hard and practical. Can we be certain that his relationship with Juliet would have worked? This boy – and he is clearly so – who we first meet wandering the streets inconsolably, his entire person heaving in some great, perpet-

ual sigh, melodramatic, self-indulgent, and all because the girl he is "in love" with, his Rosaline, does not wish to be in love, and worse, does not want to have sex. He, too, is a loose canon (in all senses of the word). He goes to the Capulet party in the hopes of meeting her there, sees Juliet, and seduces her on the spot, and on the rebound. Even Friar Lawrence scoffs at his flightiness. He is not in love with Juliet, this young girl of 13 who he will marry the very next day. He is in love with love. With some juvenile fantasy of passion and romance, which excludes, ignores, any reality of the person or the consequences. Their relationship is extremely dangerous. Reckless. For if Capulet found out, he would surely make good on his threat to his daughter. It was a father's right, at that time, to marry off his pubescent daughter to an older man as an arrangement of business, to ensure her virginity in return for a more solid social standing. What would become of them should she be cast out of her home? The Montagues would support them, perhaps (Romeo's Mother could most probably convince her husband of that), if, however, they were still alive to do so. For there is still that primary conflict, which would be exacerbated beyond control, not to mention the Prince's reaction to having lost an invaluable prospect.

And if they were cast off together, banished, disgraced? What then? Could this boy endure emptying a slop-bucket? Would he still be so in love without any resources or prospects? And might it not be a pattern of his behavior which he repeats in disillusionment? To fall once again in love with another girl? What would become of Juliet then?

Any intervention must eventually remove Tybalt from the picture, long enough, at least, to allow the Prince to resolve the differences between Capulet and Montague (for only he can), and longer still to let these two old men get their houses in order. But however we contrive it, we must first remove Romeo, and immediately. He must not be allowed to meet an illiterate servant on the streets of Verona, must not hear the name of Rosaline on a guest list, and must in no way be allowed near the Capulets that night, or any – not, at least, for the next two years, not until Juliet has married the wealthy and handsome, arrogant, stiff, and dispassionate Count Paris.

* All lines from the play taken from a translation by August Wilhelm von Schlegel (1797). English version from Shakespeare's complete original script based on the Second Quarto of 1599, with corrections and alternate text from other editions, downloaded from www.hundsnest.com, David Hundsnest, editor, 2004.

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Hinweis: Der vorliegende Text ist das Resultat einer Reihe von Gastseminaren an der Universität Münster zum Thema Mediation und Konfliktmanagement, in denen der Autor A.C. Whelan gemeinsam mit seinen Studenten das geschilderte Gedankenexperiment durchgeführt hat.