



Teaching Shakespeare's Greatest Plays & Sonnets with Dr. Joshua Avery

Lecture 7: Romeo and Juliet

Outline:

General Observations

- There are larger themes than just the love denied to the lovers.
- There is a lot in the play about politics (possibility and problems), community (family), and peace.

Act I, Scene I

- It is good for students to pick up the full ugliness of what is being said.
- How should honor be approached?
- The intense honor code of the culture means one is sometimes obliged as it were to commit violence in order to avoid disgrace.
- Peace implies lack of manliness.
- If you're going to use your sword, use it to be peacemaker and a mediator. Tybalt says to Benvolio, "You have a drawn sword and you're lecturing me about peace." Ask the students: What is the unstated assumption behind Tybalt's argument here?
 - Force cannot be used for peace.
 - How do we keep peace? Could it be through violence?
 - Lurking further, is the question of God. How would God bring about peace? What does it mean for God to do it? What does it mean for a human to do it? What does it mean for a political community to use violence or force for the sake of peace? How does this work?
- We see multiple attempts to hold back violence.
- Love is not just gentle, love is a god, who is terrible.
- All things proceed from love. Love is a kind of first principle (Prime Mover). Every evil thing you do is coming from love of something (justice, lust, power).
 - In Augustine's Confessions, when trying to describe the nature of God, Augustine goes through a series of oxymorons.
 - Romeo uses oxymorons to describe love. Oxymorons are in way pointing to the idea that we just don't know.
- Is it love or beauty causing this reaction in him? It is this tension between the imminent and the transcendent.

Act I, Scene IV



- The way Mercutio responds to Romeo is very ironic. The meaning of dreams was not agreed upon by Catholics and Protestants. Mercutio is not buying that Romeo's dream has prophetic power.
- Everyone is dreaming what they wish more of in their life. Dreams are fantasies.
- Romeo wants to insist that there is an imminence there that he's hearing from a divine source.

Act I, Scene V

- The language is sacramental, Catholic.
- Imagine sacramentalism operating through Eros. We are divinizing romantic love.

Act II, Scene II

- Juliet is making a claim like a in a nominalist debate with a realist.
 - Nominalist view is deconstructive. Things don't have real existence independent of the names.
 - She is thinking in very modern, individualistic terms.
- What is proper courtship? We can just ignore, transcend forms.
 - There is glorification of individual transcendence.
 - There are problems with this view. Help the students how far this going and what this would imply.

Act II, Scene III

- The Friar represents what would resemble a more sacramental conception of how there could be free will. This is different from a total depravity model.
- Friar Laurence says that for the good of the whole community, I'll make this alliance happen. He will do this for the sake of politics.

Act II, Scene IV

- Mercutio represents a certain kind of instinctive conservative.
- Mercutio is saying to come back and be more natural, come back to what our conventions are.
- Love should not be bound by physical limitations. This love is transcendent.

Act II, Scene VI

- Romeo talks very much like a romantic.
- Friar Laurence says this is not as permanent as you think.

Act III, Scene I

- Love has a way of extending itself and expanding if the love is good.
- Romeo is under obligation to fight (honor code). The honor code is part of the problem.

Act III, Scene II

- Juliet is faced with the mysterious and unknowable (contradiction). She uses oxymorons to express what is seemingly impossible.
- Juliet defends Romeo. Romeo is turned into a god. This is a romantic exultation.

Act III, Scene III

- This scene has some very important moments from Friar Laurence.



- Laurence is arguing along stoic lines. Laurence is attempting to argue for moderation.
- Suicide, in a certain sense, is more evil than murder. Murder is killing another person. Suicide is killing the whole world.
- Laurence says that it is not all bad, no matter your emotions.
- Have the students decide whether Friar Laurence's corrections of Romeo are appropriate.
- Romeo to Friar Laurence: You don't know how it feels (classic argument). This is a bit unfair, nobody is wholly in another person's shoes. This is a classic fallacy. There is probably more misunderstandings from the youth to the old. The old has experienced everything and had time to reflect on things. This is a typical feeling of the youth. There is much irrationality coming from Romeo.

Act III, Scene V

- There are some comic exchanges between Romeo and Juliet about whether morning is coming.
- Juliet rightly chooses Romeo's safety over his company, which shows actual love for Romeo.
- Maybe Fortune will change her mind (Fortune is unreliable). At least there is freedom. Juliet playing with the idea that bad luck can at least change.

Act V

- When Capulet realizes that Juliet resisting him, he is in a rage. He dehumanizes Juliet.
- Some of what Capulet thinks of a love is more control. He thinks that this is love. He is making her a tool for what he wants (objectifying her).
- Juliet says that she knows he meant well. I am not ungrateful, but what you are demanding of me cannot be done.
- This is Capulet's complete unwillingness to see another point of view.

Act IV, Scene I

- Juliet is saying to Paris, "Do you want to know that I love you, or do you want me to say that I love you?"

Act IV, Scene III

- Is she going to try the stunt suggested by the Friar?
- This is horror imagery.

Act V, Scene I

- Romeo has an interesting conversation with the apothecary.
- Romeo is saying that the apothecary is outside of the laws. The apothecary says, "My poverty, but not my will consents."

Act V, Scene III

- Romeo is playing the chivalrous knight, protecting her from death.
- Juliet had stated that all norms can be eradicated. The first words from Montague's mouth are basically, "Couldn't you have been more polite."
- Should Laurence have tried this whole thing? Scholarship is divided on how harshly to judge Laurence. It was a very risky plot.



- There should be a discussion with students about what is tragedy.
- Peace is finally brokered.
 - Both fathers are now going to promote the honor of the other family.
 - This took the sacrifice of the lovers to bring the families out of their pride.
 - This is tragedy ends with real hope, as the darkness brings about good (like the sacrifice of Christ).
 - What can bring about peace? The tragedy did it.
 - Great suffering can bring about good.