

Romeo and Juliet Context

FATE AND ASTROLOGY

- The Elizabethans as a generation had a particular interest in **astrology** and Queen Elizabeth famously had her own personal astrologer who provided her with advice based on how he interpreted her fate through the stars.
- The term **"star cross-d"** was **coined** by Shakespeare and stems from the inherent belief Shakespeare's generation had in the immense power of **celestial bodies** (stars, planets, the moon etc).
- JW Draper writes in his article 'generally accepted astrology as a science' that 'everyone knew the moon governed the rise and fall of the tides; and what is man that he should escape such power?', which surmises the Elizabethan belief in astrology nicely.

Link to play: The prologue of the plays introduces themes of **fate and determinism**, which is where the phrase "star-cross'd" originates from.

It gives the play a sort of **nihilistic** (the belief that everything is trivial, and nothing matters) feel because we know from the onset that no matter what the lovers do, they cannot escape their fate. Shakespeare shows fate to be **insurmountable** (cannot overcome), **attributing** a huge amount of power to the stars.

Furthermore astrology links to horoscopes. Juliet is born on Lammas Eve which makes her a Leo. She is an exemplary Leo, fiery and determined. This reinforces the power celestial bodies have over humans.

THE PETRARCHAN LOVER

- The Petrarchan lover is a term coined by Petrarch in his devotional poems and it defines a man who is hopelessly and **unrequitedly** (his love is not returned) in love with a woman he cannot have.
- A Petrarchan lover **idolises** the object of his love, placing her on a **pedestal** and lamenting that he cannot have her in **melancholic ramblings**. The woman is usually unaware that she is the object of such love.

Link to play: In Act 1 scene 1 of Romeo and Juliet, Romeo is **unrequitedly in love** with Rosaline, who has made a vow of **chastity**, meaning that she will not return his affections.

Romeo abandons this supposed passionate love for Rosaline, however, upon seeing Juliet and in this, Shakespeare **satirises** (ridicules) the Petrarchan lover.

He shows, through Romeo, the Petrarchan lover **to lack grounding** in their love, often loving an **idolised** version of the woman rather than as she really is.

Furthermore, the Petrarchan lover **objectifies** women, viewing them as objects rather than real people, which Shakespeare ridicules.

CATHOLICS VS PROTESTANTS

- Shakespeare was writing after the **protestant reformation** and was known to be a dedicated Protestant. The play is set in Italy, meaning the characters were **Roman catholic**.
- The move from **Catholicism to Protestantism undermined** the concept of religion and showed it to be open to change and often subject to public opinion. After all, the main reason for Henry VIII's approval of the change was that it meant he could divorce his wife.

Link to play: Friar Lawrence is led by the Catholic desire to do good and **dissolve** hatred, the reason he marries Romeo and Juliet is because he believes it will end the feud between their two families.

And yet his religious **aspiration** (goal) for peace is not enough to overcome the power of fate. Catholicism, in the play, is shown to be **fallible** (capable of making mistakes or being wrong) and the play very much feels like **a critique of Catholicism**.

OVID'S METAMORPHOSES

- While Shakespeare coined the term star-cross'd lovers, the concept of lover's who are prevented from being together by **fate** had been told of long before Shakespeare's time. The trope can be seen in Ovid's **Pyramus and Thisbe**, a tale in his **Metamorphoses**, published around the 8th century AD.
- The tale tells of two young Babylonians who fell in love but, because of their rivaling families, could not be together. The tale ends in a very similar way to Romeo and Juliet and Shakespeare's play is considered a re-telling of Ovid's.

Link to play: The play's ending is notably similar to that of **Pyramus and Thisbe's** and both plays contain the trope of star cross lovers which serves to **magnify the play's tragedy** genre.

Shakespeare's re-telling of a tragic tale serves to **re-emphasise** the themes of the two tales, which is the **destructive nature of feuds** the tragic how love should **surmount** (overcome) hate.

ITALY

- Italy, in Shakespeare's eyes was a **foreign land** which had a political situation that was very much differently to England. Shakespeare set seven of his plays in **Renaissance Italy**, which seems odd given that he lived in England
- In setting his play in another country, Shakespeare is able to make **commentaries and criticism** that he could claim were not related to his own society. Italy was far enough away and different enough, politically, that he could make this claim, but close enough and similar enough that people could make links between the society he criticises and Elizabethan society.

Link to play: Prince Escalus in the play, while he **wields** (holds) a lot of power, still manages to allow two murders and a suicide to happen under his reign.

This might be interpreted as a criticism of Royalty on Shakespeare's part and yet the fact the play is set in Italy makes it seem like a critique of Italian royalty **thus rendering Shakespeare blameless** in any accusation of treason.

ITALY CONTINUED

- Italy was believed to be a romantic, wild country, in which women were sexually promiscuous and men were violent and prone to duels. Italy, for Shakespeare's audience, would have been a more exciting setting than England.

Link to play: Juliet's lustfulness and **sexual promiscuity** and Tybalt's fiery, easily provoked nature demonstrates these stereotypes of Italians.

THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING

- **The great chain of being** was the belief that God created the world with a **clear hierarchical structure encompassing all matter and life**. In the human order, the monarch held the seat at the top of the hierarchical structure, giving religious and political significance to their choices. **Men were seen as higher on the structure than women**, so women were expected to be subordinate to their husbands, fathers, and brothers.
- In Shakespeare's time, people on the whole were much more religious than we are today, and they would have considered the great chain of being to be **a fact of life**, rather than a religious belief..

Link to play: It is clear that Romeo and Juliet are both **punished through their violation of natural order**, and therefore the Great chain of being. They both try altering their position through their relationship with one another.

Juliet's strong and fiery nature could also be seen to be a perversion of the Great chain of being as in terms of the structure, she would have violated her role as a woman **by not being submissive as she disobeyed her father's (the patriarch) orders** to marry Paris.

Summary

| CONTEXT | SUMMARY |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Fate and Astrology | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Elizabethans believed in the power of celestial bodies. - Explains the role fate and determinism plays in the play. - Also explains why Juliet's personality matches her Leo horoscope. |
| The Petrarchan Lover | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Petrarchan lover idolises a woman who does not return his affections - Romeo is a Petrarchan lover - In his idolisation he objectifies the woman he loves because he doesn't see her as a real person. |
| Catholic vs Protestants | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shakespeare wrote after the reformation + was a protestant - He undermines Catholicism through the ineptness of friar Lawrence |
| Ovid's Metamorphoses | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Romeo and Juliet is based on Pyramus and Thisbe - The re-telling emphasises the tragedy genre - Also emphasise the themes of feuds and hatred |
| Italy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shakespeare sets his play in Italy so that he can criticise society and escape accusations of treason or treachery |
| Italy Continued | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shakespeare's audience would've viewed Italians as wild and sexually promiscuous. |
| The Great Chain Of Being | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - God created a hierarchical structure that encompassed all matter and life - It was seen as a fact of life |