

*TheatreHistory.com*

Home
Bookstore
Links
E-mail

\$19,900

\$66,500

\$18,500

## LYRICISM AND CHARACTER IN ROMEO AND JULIET

by: G.G. Gervinus

The following article was originally published in *Shakespeare Commentaries*, vol. i. Trans. F.E. Bunnett. London, 1863.

There are in [Romeo and Juliet](#) three passages of an essentially lyric nature: Romeo's declaration of love at the ball; Juliet's soliloquy at the beginning of the bridal-night; and the parting of the two on the morning following this night. In all these passages \_Shakespeare\_ has followed fixed lyric forms of poetry, corresponding to the existing circumstances, and well filled with the usual images and ideas of the respective styles. The three species we allude to, are: the sonnet, the epithalamium, or nuptial poem, and the dawn-song.

Romeo's declaration of love to Juliet at the ball is certainly not confined within the usual limits of a sonnet, yet in structure, line, and treatment it agrees with this form, or is derived from it.

Juliet's soliloquy before the bridal-night (III, ii) (and this Halpin has pointed out in the writings of the Shakespeare-society in his usual intellectual manner) calls to mind the epithalamium, the nuptial poem of the age. Shakespeare draws over it the veil of chastity, which never with him is wanting when required.

The Poet's model in this scene (III, ii) is a kind of dialogue-poem, which took its rise at the time of the Minnesingers--the dawn-song. In England there were also these dawn-songs; the song to which, in *Romeo and Juliet* itself, allusion is made, and which is printed in the first volume of the papers of the Shakespeare-society, is expressive of such a condition. The uniform purport of these songs is, that two lovers, who visit each other by night for secret conference, appoint a watcher, who wakes them at dawn of day, when, unwilling to separate, they dispute between themselves, or with the watchman, whether the light proceeds from the sun or moon, the waking song from the nightingale or the lark; in harmony with this, is the purport also of

\$66,500

\$39,250

\$19,900

\$47,900

this dialogue, which, indeed, far surpasses every other dawn-song in poetic charm and merit.

Thus, then, this tragedy, which in the sustaining of its action has always been considered as the representative of all [love poetry](#), has in these passages formally admitted three principal styles, which may represent the erotic lyric. As it has profoundly appropriated to itself all that is most true and deep in the innermost nature of love, so the poet has imbued himself with those external forms also, which the human mind had created long before in this domain of poetry.

By Friar Lawrence, who, as it were, represents the part of the chorus in this tragedy, the leading idea of the piece is expressed in all fulness, an idea that runs throughout the whole, that excess in any enjoyment however pure in itself, transforms its sweet into bitterness, that devotion to any single feeling, however noble, bespeaks its ascendancy; that this ascendancy moves the man and woman out of their natural spheres; that love can only be a companion to life, and cannot fully fill out the life and business of the man especially; that in the full power of its first rising, it is a paroxysm of happiness, which, according to its nature, cannot continue in equal strength; that, as the poet says in an image, it is a flower that

"Being smelt, with that part cheers each part;  
Being tasted, slays all senses with the heart."

These ideas are placed by the poet in the lips of the wise Lawrence in almost a moralizing manner, with gradually increasing emphasis, as if he would provide most circumspectly that no doubt should remain of his meaning. He utters them in his first soliloquy, under the smile of the vegetable world with which he is occupied, in a manner merely *instructive*, and as if without application; he expresses them *warningly* when he unites the lovers, at the moment when he assists them; and finally he repeats them *reprovingly* to Romeo in his cell, when he sees the latter undoing himself and his own work, and he predicts what the end will be.

Averse to the family feuds, Romeo is early isolated and alienated from his own house. Oppressed by society repugnant to him, the overflowing feeling is compressed within a bosom which finds no one in whom it may confide. Of refined mind, and of still more refined feelings, he repels relatives and friends who seek him, and is himself repulsed by a beloved one, for whom he entertains rather an ideal and imaginary affection. Reserved, disdainful of advice, melancholy, laconic, vague, and subtile in his scanty words, he shuns the light, he is an interpreter of dreams, a foreboding disposition, a nature full of fatality. His parents stand aloof from him in a certain background of insignificance; with his nearest relatives and friends he has no heartfelt association. The peaceful, self-sufficient Benvolio, presuming upon a fancied influence over Romeo, is too far beneath him; Mercutio's is a nature too remote from his own. He and Tybalt, on the opposite side, are the two real promoters, the irreconcilable nurturers of the hostile spirit between the two houses. Tybalt appears as a brawler by profession, differing in his dark animosity and outward elegance from the merry and cynical Mercutio, who calls him a "fashion-monger." Mercutio, a perfect contrast to Romeo, is a man without culture, coarse and rude, ugly, a scornful ridiculer of all sensibility and love, of all dreams and presentiments, one who loves to hear himself talk, and in the eyes of his noble friend 'will speak more in a minute than he will stand to in a month;' a man gifted with such a habit of wit, and such a humorous perception of all things, that, even in the consciousness of his death-wound and in the bitterness of anger against the author and manner of the blow, he loses not the expression of his humour. According to that description of himself, which he draws in an ironical attack against the good Benvolio, he is a quarrel-seeking brawler, a spirit of minute contradiction, too full of confidence in his powers of strength, and as such he proves himself in his meeting with Tybalt. Our Romanticists, according to their fashion, blindly in love with the merry fellow, have started the opinion that Shakespeare despatched Mercutio because he blocked up the way for his principal character. This opinion rivals in absurdity that which [Goethe](#), in his incomprehensible travesty, has done with this character....

Now to that insignificant Benvolio and to this coarse Mercutio, who degrades the object of his idolatrous love with foul derision, Romeo feels himself not disposed to impart the silent joys and sorrows of his heart, and this constrained reserve works fatally upon his nature and upon his identity....

The Juliet who is to replace Rosaline, the heiress of the hostile house, lives, unknown to him, in like sorrowful circumstances, though in a womanly manner more careless of them. A tender being, small, of delicate frame, a bark not formed for severe shocks and storms, she lives in a domestic intercourse, which unknown must be inwardly more repulsive to her, than the casual intercourse with his friends can be to Romeo. As Romeo, when elevated by happiness, and not depressed by his sickly feelings, appears clever and acute enough, in showing himself equal or superior in quick repartee even to Mercutio, Juliet also is of similar intellectual ability; an Italian girl, full of cunning self-command, of quiet, steady behaviour, equally clever at evasion and dissimulation. She has inherited something of determination from her father; by quick and witty replies she evades Count Paris; not without reason she is called by her father in his anger, 'a chop-logic.' How can she, in whose mind is so much emotion, whose heart is so tender, and in whose nature we see an originally cheerful disposition,--how can she find pleasure in her paternal home, a home at once dull, joyless, and quarrelsome? Old Capulet (a masterly design of the poet) is a man of unequal temper, like all passionate natures, quite calculated to explain the alternate outbursts and pauses, in the discord between the houses. Now in his zeal he forgets his crutch, that he may wield the old sword in his aged hands, and now in merrier mood he takes part against his quarrelsome nephew with the enemy of his house, who trustfully attends his ball. On one occasion he thinks his daughter too young to marry, and two days afterwards she appears to him ripe to be a bride; at first, with respect to the suitor Paris, like a good father, he leaves the fate of his daughter entirely to her own free choice, then, in the outburst of his passion, he compels her to a hated marriage, and threatens her, in a brutal manner, with blows and expulsion. Outward refinement of manner was not to be learned from the man who speaks to the ladies

of his ball like a sailor, no more than inward morality from him who had once been a 'mouse-hunter', and had to complain of the jealousy to his wife. The Lady Capulet is at once a heartless and unimportant woman, who asks advice of her nurse, who, in her daughter's extremest suffering, coldly leaves her, and entertains thoughts of poisoning Romeo. The Nurse--Angelica--designed already in her entire character in Brooke's narrative, is then the real mistress of the house; she manages the mother, she assists the daughter, and fears not to cross the old man in his most violent anger; she is a talker with little modesty, whose society could not aid in making Juliet a Diana, an instructress without propriety, a confidante with no enduring fidelity, from whom Juliet at length separates with a sudden rejection. To this society is added a conventional wooing of Count Paris, which, for the first time, obliges the innocent child to read her heart. Hitherto she had, at the most, experienced a sisterly inclination for her cousin Tybalt, as the least intolerable of the many unamiable beings who formed her society. But how little filial feeling united the daughter to the family is glaringly exhibited in that passage, in which, even before she has experienced the worst treatment from her parents, the striking expression escapes her on the death of Tybalt, that, if it had been her parent's death, she would have mourned them only with 'modern lamentation.'

When her mother announces to her that the day for her marriage to Paris is fixed, Juliet is, for the moment, carried out of her womanly sphere. Just elevated by the happiness of Romeo's society, she has lost the delicate line of propriety within which her being moved. Even when her mother speaks of her design of causing Romeo to be poisoned, she plays with too great wantonness with her words when she should, rather, have been full of care, and when her mother announces to her the unasked-for-husband, she has lost her former craftiness, with a mild request or with a clever pretext to delay the marriage; she is scornful towards her mother, straight-forward and open to her father, whose caprice and passion she provokes, and subsequently she trifles with confession and sacred things in a manner not altogether womanly.

## FURTHER STUDIES:

- [The Courtship of Romeo and Juliet](#) - An essay on the brief courtship of Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers.
- [An Essay on Romeo and Juliet](#) - General essay giving an overview of the play and its theme.
- [Romeo and Juliet Quotes](#) - Quotations from the play.
- **Purchase [Romeo and Juliet](#)**
- **Search [eBay!](#) for *SHAKESPEARE* collectibles**

**Back to [Romeo and Juliet](#)**

[Home](#) · [Theatre Links](#) · [Monologues](#) · [One Act Plays](#) · [Bookstore](#) · © 2006 **TheatreHistory.com**

2022 Lexus LS 500 Base  
\$87,650

See More