Juliet: A Study, by Michael Kneeland

*Romeo and Juliet* is perhaps the first play in which Shakespeare strikes a balance between lyricism, intense pathos, and wisdom. This is nowhere else more evident than in the character of Juliet, who joins her doomed lover in an untimely death, but who for much of the play demonstrates a cognitive power unseen in Shakespeare’s previous plays. Unlike Romeo, who only ever seems to be mastered by his unchecked emotions and unrelenting fear of physical loneliness, Juliet ponders the situations in which she finds herself and thus appears infinitely more mature than her age and hastily conceived love would imply.

While standing on her balcony, thinking herself alone (though, in truth, Romeo is hiding in the bushes below and watching her), Juliet sublimely waxes philosophical as she contemplates names and their relationship to reality:

‘Tis but a name that is my enemy.

Thou [Romeo] art thyself, though not a Montague.

What’s Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,

Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part

Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!

What’s in a name? That which we call a rose

By any other word would smell as sweet.

So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,

Retain that dear perfection which he owes

Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,

And, for thy name, which is no part of thee,

Take all myself. (2.2.41-52)

Recognizing that her family is embattled in a feud against Romeo’s family, Juliet seems desperate to prove that Romeo himself has nothing to do with the violence. Using the metaphor of a rose’s disparity from its given name, she concludes that Romeo’s family name has nothing to do with his actions: being a Montague does not by itself preclude Romeo’s involvement in the bitter Montague-Capulet feud. In fact, Juliet is absolutely correct in this thinking, though there is no way for her to know this information, for Romeo reveals his impatience with the feud in Act 1, Scene 1, when he comes late upon the scene of the street brawl that opens the play:

O me! What fray was here?

Yet tell me not, for I have heard it all. (1.1.178-179)

Romeo, Juliet thinks, would retain his perfection even if he were called by any name other than “Montague”–a name that to her, a Capulet, should seem imperfect.

Notably, this ability to think through such a dilemma is completely alien to Romeo. Indeed, after he learns that Juliet belongs to the enemy family, he does not ponder the predicament but instead hastily tries to return to Capulet’s house by way of the garden, finding himself incapable of being separated from Juliet:

Can I go forward when my heart is here?

Turn back, dull earth, and find thy center out. (2.1.1-2)

Romeo’s fear of being physically alone overrides any amount of powerful, original thought he might otherwise have had. The only solution he can find to this problem is to return, as it were, to the scene of the crime.

Later in the play, after Romeo has murdered Tybalt, the Nurse, wracked with agony at the news, tries and fails to clearly relate the turn of events to Juliet; frustrated with the Nurse’s unintelligibility, exclaims,

What devil art thou that dost torment me thus?

This torture should be roared in dismal hell.

Hath Romeo slain himself? Say thou but “Ay,”

And that bare vowel “I” shall poison more

Than the death-darting eye of the cockatrice.

I am not I if there be such an “I,”

Or those eyes shut that makes thee answer “Ay.”

If he be slain, say “Ay,” or if not, “No.”

Brief sounds determine my weal or woe. (3.2.49-57)

Even in the midst of her frustration, Juliet has the cognitive power to pull off a triple pun! But, as Northrop Frye has noted, “she’s not ‘playing’ with the words: she’s shredding them to bits in an agony of frustration and despair.” The “ay” – “I” – “eye” figure, then, is an example of Juliet’s authentic strength of mind, for even in a moment of crisis, her thinking far surpasses that of any other character in the play.

In the same scene as Juliet learns that her “three-hours” husband has murdered her cousin Tybalt, she thinks through the chaos and calamity of the situation to discover that fate has graced her with a rather positive outcome:

But wherefore, villain, didst thou kill my cousin?

That villain cousin would have killed my husband.

Back, foolish tears, back to your native spring;

Your tributary drops belong to woe,

Which you, mistaking, offer up to joy.

My husband lives, that Tybalt would have slain,

And Tybalt’s dead, that would have slain my husband.

All this is comfort. Wherefore weep I then? (3.2.110-118)

Though she moves from this into the notion that Romeo’s banishment is worse for her than death — or the deaths of “ten thousand Tybalts,” or even the deaths of her mother, father, Tybalt, Romeo, and herself — one can hardly blame her for this hasty conclusion: for though she is married, she is still a 13-year-old girl living in a society which dictates that she cannot leave her father’s house without her parents’ permission. Romeo’s banishment, therefore, means that she will never be able to venture forth to visit him outside Verona’s walls; and this loss of love, especially in the context of the ideologies of Courtly Love that so permeate the play, is understandably equatable to death.

I should hasten to add here that Romeo is incapable of reaching Juliet’s conclusion in 3.2.115-116 on his own, and in fact requires Friar Lawrence to spell it out for him plainly:

Tybalt would kill thee,

But thou slewest Tybalt: there art thou happy.

The law that threatened death becomes thy friend

And turns it to exile: there art thou happy. (3.3.147-150)

Indeed, despite the Friar’s flustered admonishments, Romeo does not so much as calm down until the “ghostly confessor” mentions that he should sneak into Juliet’s room to comfort her during this difficult time. Once again, it isn’t any amount of clear-headed reason that drives Romeo, but rather his overpowering fear of being physically alone, a fear that the Friar assures him still can be remedied by sneaking into Juliet’s room as previously planned.

The last half of the play finds Juliet the victim of circumstances from which no power of thought can save her: the stars have spoken, and the only power it seems she has it to commit suicide. (Not surprisingly, Juliet recognizes this fact at the very end of Act 3, Scene 5, when she declares, “If all else fail, myself have power to die” (3.5.255).) Her parents violently berate her because she refuses to marry Paris; the Nurse betrays her by advising her to forget Romeo and marry the count; Friar Lawrence victimizes her by way of his convoluted and unnecessary plot involving his “distilling liquor” — unnecessary, for what prevents him from merely secreting Juliet out of Verona to join her husband in Mantua? — and the friar mishandles her yet again when he abandons her in the Capulet crypt. All else does fail, and her only option at the end is suicide. Thus, Juliet’s death is the true tragedy in the play, for Romeo’s is the result of rash behavior: unlike Juliet, he does have options other than suicide. Had he, for instance, remained in Mantua but for a single day longer, he may have lived to see his young wife alive. But Juliet follows the only course left open to her, and in that course, Shakespeare’s first cognitively powerful character aspires immortality.

**Works Cited Entry**

Kneeland, Michael. “Juliet: A Study.” *Humanities Teacher Man*. 14 December 2012. Web. 27 May

2016.