"To Free-Town, Our Common Judgement Place": Commoners in *Romeo and Juliet*

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Although the bulk of Shakespeare's plays open with characters of the noble class on stage, five open with commoners. In each case, the commoner characters direct our gaze and focus our attention on the issue at hand. The device is used frequently throughout Shakespeare's canon: the commoner character is presented matter-of-factly and sympathetically, with little affect and sometimes with little development, and thus serves a similar role to that of the Chorus in a Sophocles play, leading a commoner audience member to recognize the nature of the conflict in the play at hand.

In *Coriolanus* we meet an angry crowd, Citizens who are starving and who blame Caius Martius, who will become Coriolanus, for their condition. Although some scholars argue for an ambivalent audience response to this protagonist, using evidence from points later in the play, a commoner audience member would be attuned to his flaw, his culpability, his propensity toward ego and selfishness because they identify with the commoners who describe him this way in this first interaction with these characters. *Timon of Athens* and *Julius Caesar* both begin with tradesmen: in *Timon*, a Poet, Painter, Jeweler, and Mercer comment on Fortune and on those whom Fortune favors, like Timon, already precursing his fall as Fortune's wheel turns; in *Julius Caesar*, a Carpenter and Cobbler celebrate Caesar, prepossessing the audience toward compassion for the leader besieged by other leaders envious of his power and popularity. *Antony and Cleopatra* is loaded with commoners, and the two who open the play, Demetrius and Philo, do not appear again (in fact, Demetrius does not speak even here). Philo delivers

the famous assessment of Antony, "the triple pillar of the world transformed into a strumpet's fool" (1.1.12-13),[1] focusing our gaze on an Antony already overthrown by love.

Romeo and Juliet begins, of course, with a sonnet, the first four lines of which are, "Two households, both alike in dignity, / In fair Verona, where we lay our scene, / From ancient grudge break to new mutiny, / Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean." When we consider a commoner audience member's response, two words stand out in this first quatrain, *dignity* and *civil*. In Shakespeare's age, an age in which Shakespeare himself purchases his coat of arms and right to the title *gentleman*, *dignity* connotes estate, position, rank, as designated by the remaining vestiges of feudalism that still marked Elizabethan English society, as well as the worth and merit that English people were recognizing as the characteristics of dignity and that even Elizabeth I, and more so her successor James I, would use to promote a greater and greater number of commoners to the ranks of the gentle. *Civil* reminds Shakespeare's audience of the social civility necessary for citizens in community. "Civil blood" cannot but stain "civil hands": in *Richard II*, Richard decries the "civil and uncivil arms" that are rising up against him (3.3.102), the legitimate monarch, reinforcing the general sense of the need for overall civility implied in this play's prologue as well.

Peter Herman, in his article, "Tragedy and Crisis of Authority in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*," points to the *Mirror for Magistrates* and the tradition of Elizabethan tragedy that grows from it as upholding the aristocratic power structures and advocating an "unambiguously didactic" precept: "Avoid corruption, either moral or political," Herman paraphrases, "or you will face terrible consequences."[2] Herman, following Auden and other twentieth-century critics, represents *Romeo and Juliet*'s critique of the aristocracy as one intended for an aristocratic consumer. As numerous scholars, including Arthur F. Kinney in *Shakespeare by Stages*, point out, though, a substantial proportion of Shakespeare's audiences in the 1590s were commoners.[3] If we reconsider *Romeo and Juliet* from the perspective of a commoner theater-goer, we redirect our gaze from what Herman calls "an interrogation machine" that concentrates on "established authority" and "spares nobody"[4] toward a critique of what in Shakespeare's "more or less contemporary"[5] play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is called "ancient

privilege" (1.1.42), not for, but by that commoner audience. Although the commoners in *Romeo and Juliet* are not unaffected by the failures of the aristocracy which they serve, they are not the subject of the play's critique; rather it is the commoners' judgment that Shakespeare courts through his representations of commoners within this play.

As the play proper begins, we meet Sampson and Gregory, two of the civility, the citizen commoners, these two in the employ of the Capulets. Sampson begins the play with, "Gregory, o'my word, we'll not carry coals" (1.1.1), an idiomatic expression that to the Elizabethan audience means, simply, "We are not going to do pointless work." (The expression comes from an allusive phrase, to "carry coal to Newcastle," Newcastle being a major coal-mining center in England as far back as the Middle Ages: it's pointless to take coal to a place full of coal.) This *in medias res* assertion suggests Sampson's frustration at his and Gregory's occupation and would undoubtedly pique the curiosity of Shakespeare's audience. Although some scholars argue that Gregory's response to Sampson, "No, for then we should be colliers" (1.1.2), is another allusive joke, based on a 1591 "cony-catching" treatise by humorist Robert Greene, it seems more probable that Gregory is simply being simple, taking Sampson's remark literally, and agreeing that becoming a "collier," a coal-carrier, is something he would refuse to do—something below his standing and station as a retainer in a noble household. Sampson tries to bring Gregory up to speed, explaining, "I mean, if we be in choler" (that is, if we have some reason to be angry), then "we'll draw" (1.1.3), then we'd be willing to draw our swords and fight)—but only then, not because of something pointless.

Gregory still doesn't seem to get it, mistaking *choler*, the common word for "anger," or too much fire or yellow bile in one's constitution, for *collar*, being collared, being grabbed by the authorities after committing a crime: "Ay, while you live, draw your neck out o'th'collar" (1.1.4). Sampson thinks he's got Gregory on track and remarks, "I strike quickly, being moved," and Gregory knows exactly where Sampson is now, "But thou art not quickly moved to strike" (1.1.5-6), reiterating Sampson's first remark of the scene, that he will not "carry coals," or participate in a pointless endeavor. Rather, he would only "strike," "being moved" to do so by something relevant to him.

It is in line 7 that Sampson first introduces the Montagues: "A dog of the house of Montague moves me." Sampson may be posturing in reference to the "quarrel" between the Capulets and Montagues, or he may be mocking it ironically, playing on dogs' low status in Elizabethan households. Gregory takes Sampson's "move" remark as a joke, "To move is to stir: and to be valiant is to stand: therefore, if thou art moved, thou runn'st away" (1.1.8-9), jesting on Sampson's ambivalence and propensity not to want to "carry coals." Sampson's remark suggests the extent of his commitment to the feud with the Montagues: "I will take the wall," or walk in the safe part of the street, by the wall and out of the gutter into which things like chamberpots and pointless feuds are emptied, "of," or away from "any man or maid of Montague's" (1.1.10-11). Gregory teases Sampson for acting womanly—a common gendered jest in Shakespeare—since a gentleman insists that a lady "take the wall" (1.1.12). This paves the way for Sampson's punch line, "True, and therefore women being the weaker vessels are ever thrust to the wall: therefore I will push Montague's men from the wall, and thrust his maids to the wall" (1.1.13-15), turning the ongoing conversation about fighting, "draw"-ing, away from violence and toward the topic of gratuitous sexual gratification. A few lines later, Sampson finishes the jest, saying that he will "show myself a tyrant" and "cut off" the "heads" of the "maids" (1.1.17-18), to Gregory's brief shock (further evidence that Gregory has no interest in violence), which is relieved by Sampson's "their maidenheads" (1.1.20), explaining his joke to the conventionally slow-on-the-uptake Gregory. Sampson is sure that the Montague "maids" will enjoy him because "'tis known I am a pretty piece of flesh" (1.1.24-25). More often than not, Sampson punctuates this with the appropriate Shakespearean codpiece-grab.

Interjected into the middle of Sampson's self-appreciation of his sexual attractiveness and prowess is Gregory's summation of their situation: "The Quarrle is between our masters / And us their men" (1.1.16). Gregory may be implying that the "quarrel" is a class conflict between "masters" and "men," commoners, but I think it more likely that he means that the feud between the Capulets and Montagues is that of "our masters," and that Sampson and Gregory are merely "their men," forced by social inferiority and servitude to participate in a "quarrel" that is not

their own. At this point, we understand Sampson's *in medias res* remark: these two men do not want to participate in the pointless posturings and activities that are a part of their job as Capulet servants. Sampson responds to Gregory's remark by saying "'Tis all one" (1.1.17). Although Herman paraphrases the remark as meaning that "there is no difference between" the "masters" and "men,"[6] it seems more likely that the idiom represents Sampson's ambivalence regarding the situation, the feud, as well as his social position, one that by its nature reinforces the difference between "masters" and "men." This response demonstrates that Sampson's posturing in that "quarrel" is performative rather than heartfelt. "'Tis all one" because these two men have no choice but to participate, and no investment in this "quarrel."

Here, the discourse shifts again, triggered by the entrance of Abraham and Balthasar, two commoners in the employ of the Montagues. Sampson articulates his ambivalence regarding the Montague/Capulet feud by saying to Gregory in an aside, "Let us take the law of our sides: let them begin" (1.1.31), the same kind of joke that Lysander, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, makes when he tells Demetrius, "You have her father's love, Demetrius: / Let me have Hermia's. Do you marry him" (1.1.95-96). Neither Gregory nor Sampson wants a confrontation, since this is the "quarrel" of "our masters," not of "their men." Sampson says to Abraham, "I serve as good a man as you," and Abraham responds, "No better?" (1.1.43-44), reflecting some surprise that Sampson is not in the usual performative Capulet/Montague "quarrel" posture. Sampson reinforces his ambivalence in his response, "Well . . . sir," (1.1.45), or "*Well*, sir," or "Well, <u>sir</u>." Sampson's "as good a man" shows that he has little or no investment in the feud, and his "Well, sir," demonstrates his unwillingness even to enter into this kind of an argument with a man he knows is his equal.

With the entrance of the Montague nobleman Benvolio, whom Gregory sees first, Gregory suddenly urges Sampson to change his discourse again, this time to the bellicose anti-Montague performative rhetoric that Abraham had expected just before. It is only because the nobleman is present that the commoners begin to fight. Sampson tells Gregory to "remember thy [s]washing blow" (1.1.49), alluding to a fencing—not fighting—stroke that is particularly grand: perform well for the nobleman, Sampson is

saying to Gregory, since such performance is what is expected, even required, of them. Even Benvolio seems to think that this kind of fighting under the aegis of the Capulet/Montague "quarrel" is unmerited, if not pointless: "Part fools! Put up your swords, you know not what you do," he says (1.1.50). From our perspective, the perspective of the commoner audience, with a strong understanding of the purpose and use of dramatic irony, we recognize that at least the Montague servingmen, and probably the Capulet ones as well—although they are men of few words—do, in fact, "know" "what [they] do," and are doing it because it is expected of them—"swashing blows" for a good show.

The discourse changes abruptly again when Tybalt, the Capulet, enters. Tybalt addresses Benvolio, "What, art thou drawn among these heartless hinds?" (1.1.51), criticizing Benvolio for "draw"-ing—or just being—"among these heartless hinds." Whether Tybalt is calling the servants, the commoners—Montague and Capulet alike—compassionless ("heartless"), effeminate (female deer, or hinds), ungoverned ("hart-less hinds," female deer without a male deer ruler), or mere followers ("hinds," those be-"hind" the "heart"-y or "heart"-ed), he is separating Tybalt and Benvolio, the nobles, from the citizens, the commoners. Tybalt and Benvolio fight with each other, and more "citizens" enter with an "Officer" who in both the Second Quarto and the Folio is assigned the lines, "Strike! Beat them down! Down with the Capulets! Down with the Montagues!" (Consistently editors credit these lines to the "citizens," as Herman does.[7] The lines are not included at all in the First Quarto.)

This opening sequence is intended to emphasize the division between the commoners and the nobility: the commoners in Montague and Capulet employ know that this "quarrel" is not theirs; the Citizens will "beat" "down" fighters on either side of the Capulet/Montague feud, whether noble or common. Sampson may be concerned about "the law," but the first representative of it, the "Officer," suggests that "the law" simply rejects feuding ("Down with the Capulets! Down with the Montagues!"), nobility being no exception.

The general dismissal of bad behavior among the nobility is reinforced with the next entrance, this time of, first, "Old Capulet in his Gowne, and his Wife," and then "Old Montague and his

Wife." Stage directions are scant in Quarto and Folio Shakespeare, but the Folio includes the phrase "in his Gowne": When Shakespeare intends *gown* to refer to the attire of a male justice or a ruler, he uses a descriptive adjective, as in *Twelfth Night*'s Malvolio's imagined "branched velvet gown" that he wears (in his fantasies) as "Count Malvolio" (2.5.26-36); and when Shakespeare uses *gown* as a stand-alone, he is referring to a dressing gown or nightshirt (that is, when describing a man; when describing a woman, a gown is usually a gown). The Capulet and Montague wives mock their "impotent and bed-rid" (*Hamlet*, 1.2.29) husbands, making a mockery of the "loins" and "foes" and "rage" presented in the play's prologue sonnet (Prologue.5,10), in an example of the kinds of "contradictions" and "ironies" that Jill L. Levenson notes in her study of Shakespeare's adaptation of sources.[8] When Old Capulet calls for a "long sword," a weapon both anachronistic and inappropriate for the event at hand, especially when its potential wielder is in his nightclothes, Lady Capulet cries out, "A crutch, a crutch! Why call you for a sword" (1.1.60-61), suggesting her incredulousness that Old Capulet would even posture participating in a physical fight. Old Montague fares no better: Lady Montague simply stands before her husband and says, "Thou shalt not stir a foot to seek a foe" (1.1.65). So both noblemen are immobilized by the force, the power, of their wives.

When the Prince enters, he attempts to stop the fighting. He exclaims, "You men, you beasts!" (1.1.68), and we must decide to whom he addresses each noun. Since he proceeds to lay the blame for this skirmish on Old Capulet and Old Montague, it seems quite possible that the "men" remark is addressed to the "men" to whom Gregory refers, "us their men," thus making "you beasts" an address to the others, "our masters," the nobles Tybalt and Benvolio. The Prince's remark, "If ever you disturb our streets again, / Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace" (1.1.81-82), is not addressed to all of those who are brawling: servingmen's lives would not "pay the forfeit of the peace," a legal penalty, one that would have little meaning imposed upon a servingman like Samson or Gregory or Abraham or the very chatty Balthasar. Following this remark, the Prince tells "all the rest" to "depart away" (1.1.83), again reinforcing that the "forfeit" remark is addressed to the noblemen, that the Prince has separated them out from "all the

rest." His next command is to Old Capulet and Old Montague, that they will "come . . . this afternoon, / To know our further pleasure in this case, / To old Freetown, our common judgment-place" (1.1.85-87). The Prince's final order, "Once more, on pain of death, all men depart" (1.1.88), is again not addressed to the crowd as a whole: the first two clauses, "once more" and "on pain of death" pick up the vein of the Prince's address to the nobles—"Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace"—suggesting that he is reiterating that threat to them, and to Tybalt and Benvolio; then "all men depart" reiterates "all the rest depart away," which is addressed to the servingmen.

Most scholars explain "old Free-town, our common judgement-place" simply by pointing out that a source that Shakespeare likely used, Arthur Brooke's 1562 poem *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, includes the phrase, which is a transliteration of "Villa Franca," as the name of the Capulet castle (line 1974).[9] Shakespeare, though, adds a description or definition to his "Free-towne": it is not a castle, but "*our* common judgement-place." The Prince is taking the noblemen to the "place" where "common judgement" is made, "judgement" that is "common" to all, whether prince or Capulet or Montague or commoner. The phrase suggests a reversal of the social order in which nobles establish laws that commoners obey. The Prince, we might say, is handing this feud over to the "common" and for good reason: the nobles in this play, maybe excepting the Prince who chooses "Free-towne" as the "judgement-place" of choice, are not the ones whose judgment we can respect. Herman points to the Prince's "[in]ability to contain the violence," claiming that he is "ignored by the warring parties."[10] The Prince's version of restoring order does subvert the convention of an aristocratic authority, but rather than being "entirely useless," as Herman calls it,[11] it at the very least suggests a redirection of that authority toward the "common" and away from an aristocracy who cannot earn our respect.

For example, when we first hear of Romeo, he is described as a walking Petrarchan conceit, in Petrarchan love with "the fair Rosaline," whom we will never meet. When he first speaks, he sounds like he fell out of Shakespeare's sonnets: "Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs, / Being purged, a fire sparkling in

lovers' eyes, / Being vexed, a sea nourished with loving tears. / What is else? A madness most discreet, / A choking gall and a preserving sweet" (1.1.179-83). After a series of Romeo's love prates, we shift scenes to the Capulets who are preparing for a party: Old Capulet orders a servingman to deliver a stack of invitations, and, to the audience in an aside, the Servingman mutters, "Find them out whose names are written . . . I am sent to find those persons whose names are here writ, and can never find what names the writing person hath here writ" (1.2.40-42). The Servingman is illiterate, a condition that, even in the Verona of the story, would make this servingman ill-suited for his job. There is nothing funny in the Servingman's predicament, and Shakespeare's audience members would sympathize with the serving-class individual once again put into an untenable position by his noble superiors. When the Servingman happens upon Romeo and asks him if he can read, at first Romeo merely plays with the poor fellow: "Ay, if I know the letters and the language," he says, and the Servingman mistakes his jest as commiseration: "Ye say honestly, rest you merry!" (1.2.56-61). As the Servingman is turning to leave, Romeo relents: "Stay, fellow, I can read," he says (1.2.62), and helps the fellow—and himself—as he discovers that his "fair Rosaline" (1.2.78) will be at a Capulet party, which he will crash.

The American Shakespeare Center, in their touring and home production of *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by James Warren during their 2009-10 season, conflated a number of Servingman lines as well as those of the Nurse's servant, Peter. Jamie Nelson, the actor who played the role of Peter, described the conglomerate Peter's motivation as follows:

> Peter is a simple person; he leads a simple life. Anything more extravagant than the day to day is doubly exciting for him. A party is a big deal. Also, his job is to be there promptly when he is called upon, ready to do what is asked of him; that's what he knows how to do, to come when he's called, so "you've been called," and "you've been asked for" are big pieces of news in his mind. Of course, I've made even more specific inferences that add to Peter's unrest, a state that extends into the party scene itself.
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> Capulet has asked me to invite the guests on the day of the party, rather short notice. Once I've had the invitations read to me, I still have to remember all the names and run

> to each of their houses to invite them. So the running alone is exhausting. Now, our acting company is small enough that there aren't any actors on stage except those with actual text, which means that the only guests I invited that actually showed up are Mercutio and Uncle Capulet, from which I infer that I not only ran all over town, but when I got to each house, most of the prospective guests were either not at home or not interested in dining with someone who was so recently reprimanded by the Prince. So because of me, Peter, it's going to be a smaller party than originally intended. Now, I'm hoping that Capulet will have enough to drink that he won't notice, but again, given the small acting company, I am the only one there to serve drinks, and therefore we only have four goblets of wine, scarcely enough for all the guests, hardly respectful at a proper dinner party!
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> Plus, in our production, the main guitar player also plays Benvolio, which means the party-crashers play the dance music, which means that before they arrive and save my neck, I have ostensibly forgotten to hire a band! And amidst all of this, at some point it must occur to me that while I take no issue with the Montagues, many others do and it might not be the wisest or safest thing to have invited them to a Capulet party! So, in short, I've spent the whole day running around, most of the guests aren't coming, there's not enough booze, there's no band, and I've invited the household's mortal enemy! Naturally, all of this informs Peter's enormous stress and great state of emergency in 1.3. and 1.5.[12]

Lene Petersen, in her study of manuscript changes is *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*, two of Shakespeare's multi-text plays, points out that omissions and redactions in subsequent editions of a play follow the same patterns that are found in manuscript ballad tradition; thus Petersen argues against the tendency among Shakespeareans to credit the redactions that occur in Quarto and Folio editions of Shakespeare plays to the need for "reduced-cast performance on tour" and a perceived sense that "certain characters in certain scenes . . . have proven unimportant to the progression of the plot and thus have been excised through transmission."[13] So it is unlikely that Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, in the 1590s, presented the kind of economy of commoners that

is represented in the American Shakespeare Center production—and likely most current stage productions. Jamie's description of his character, Peter, demonstrates well the intensity of emotion inherent in these commoner characters nonetheless. Peter, here, exhibits qualities that are juxtaposed to those of the aristocracy in this play: Peter is responsible, conscientious, hospitable, and concerned.

In the midst of these commoner-heavy scenes is one in which another commoner, Juliet's Nurse, describes the close relationship between herself and her husband and the young Juliet (1.3.17-34). Lady Capulet dismisses the tender, even a little bit raw, story with an "Enough of this" (1.3.35), in order to ply Juliet with a pile of clichés intended to represent the not-so-attractive Paris as a suitable suitor for the young and somewhat sassy Juliet (1.3.62-75), who responds to her mother with, "I'll look to like, if looking liking move: / But no more deep will I endart mine eye / Than your consent gives strength to make it fly" (1.3.78-80). In other words, if Juliet likes what she sees, she will be interested, but if she doesn't, her mother's "consent" won't help. Juliet's love cannot be charged up simply by parental consent. Once again we find a parallel to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Juliet is in a similar position to that play's Hermia, who chooses her love despite her father's—or more ambivalently the Duke's—will. Capulet's Servingman announces that "the guests are come" and "everything in extremity" (1.3.81-82), pointing out to the audience that this is a fictional world of excesses. And as the party progresses and Mercutio "talk[s] of dreams" (1.4.50-107), the servingmen complain that they are being over-taxed with pointless orders: "We cannot be here and there too" (1.3.129).

The Balcony Scene that follows is far sillier than it has been played in most modern performances: Romeo, still unheard by Juliet, begins with more Petrarchan clichés, followed by some that only Romeo's mind could invent: "Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven, / Having some business, do entreat her eyes / To twinkle in their spheres till they return. / What if her eyes were there, and *they* in her *head*?" (2.1.60-63, emphasis mine). The scene ends with an old-fashioned version of "you hang up . . . no you hang up first . . . no you hang up" (2.1.206-end). The scene that follows introduces another commoner, Friar Laurence, to the

plot: "Holy Saint Francis," he exclaims (2.2.66), in response to the "young waverer" (2.2.92) Romeo's rapid shift from one dote to another. Friar Laurence agrees to help Romeo, not out of concern for Romeo's romantic success, but rather as a means to promote an end to the Montague/Capulet feud (2.2.93-95). All of the commoners, including the mendicant friar, want the feud ended.

The deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt at first glance seem to definitively mark the end of what has, to this point, been a comedy. The tension between comedy and tragedy continues, though, and repeatedly we are led to think that all may still be well. The Friar and the Nurse try to redirect the plot to comedy, and Capulet helps them along with his bumbling over the days in his arrangement of the Paris/Juliet match. Act 4, scene 1's "past hope, past cure, past help" (line 46) is followed in short order by the comic "unless" (line 52). By act 4, scene 2, the plot is back to that of Hermia and Lysander in act 1 of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, running away to escape the "ancient privilege" of their incompetent elders; and act 4, scene 3 presents a Juliet on a wild fantasy trip to the set of a horror flick—again, comic, albeit darkly so—or maybe not so darkly.

The plot's final and irrevocable turn to tragedy involves another commoner character, this time an Apothecary who finds himself in an unwinnable conflict with a nobleman, the again-impulsive Romeo. Romeo notes that the Apothecary is "poor" and offers him "forty ducats" for the poison (5.1.61-62). The Apothecary refuses, and Romeo browbeats him: "Famine is in thy cheeks, / Need and oppression starveth in thy eyes, / Contempt and beggary hangs upon thy back" (5.1.72-74). Romeo tells the Apothecary to "break" the "world's law" and take the money, and the Apothecary relents: "My poverty, but not my will, consents" (5.1.75-78). Herman points out that, in Brooke's *Romeus and Juliet*, "Thapothecary, high is hanged by the throte,"[14] but in this play he remains in his shop with his vocation and his poverty. Romeo says, "There's thy gold, worse poison to men's souls, / Doing more murder in this loathsome world, / Than these poor compounds" (5.1.83-85), reinforcing the wrong being done not by the Apothecary, but by the nobles: the nobles' "gold" makes commoners do bad things, and Romeo feels no compunction in turning gold to poison and poison to gold, even as he points it

out. As early as act 4, scene 4, when Juliet is believed to be dead, the Friar tells Capulet that, in death, he's achieved his goal for Juliet: "The most you sought was her promotion, / For 'twas your heaven she should be advanced" (4.4.105-106), he says, at least subtly mocking Capulet for his greed.

Gold plays a prominent role in the denouement to this play as well. The Prince upbraids the mourning noble fathers whose "discords" have "lost" them all a "brace of kinsmen" (5.3.303-304), building on the "you beasts" remark from act 1, scene1: here the noble "kinsmen" are reduced to hunting dogs (and we know from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* how important those are—but only if they can bark in harmony; see 4.1.95-119). Montague says that he "will raise [Juliet's] statue in pure gold" (5.3.309), and Capulet keeps pace: "As rich shall Romeo by his lady lie" (5.3.313). The gold statues become a parody of sorts for the lives of these two vibrant youths: gold gives the nobles the privilege to act as they do, and gold buys the poison, and gold is what is left in the wake of the havoc that these noblemen have wreaked on the lives of nobles and commoners alike. In this way *Romeo and Juliet* presents a sharp critique of the excesses, the "extremity," of a nobility that has lost sight of its responsibility for the well-being of people like those who have come to see this play.

In the penultimate lines of the play, the Prince, who earlier had said, "All are punished" (5.3.304), here says, "Some shall be pardoned, and some punished" (5.3.318). In the resolution to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, youthful disobedience to "ancient privilege" is rewarded with a wedding celebration. Here in *Romeo and Juliet*, aristocratic insistence on "ancient privilege" is metamorphosed into death. In both cases the "ancient privilege" of the aristocracy is overturned. The commoners in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* bring Shakespeare's audience to laughter by their ignorance. Those in *Romeo and Juliet* bring commoner and noble alike to a "common judgement place," holding aristocratic "extremity" accountable for the damage it can do.

Notes

1. All references to Shakespeare's plays are taken from Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen, eds., *William Shakespeare: Complete Works* (New York: Modern Library, 2007).

2. Peter C. Herman, "Tragedy and the Crisis of Authority in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet," Intertexts* 12, no. 1 (2008): 89-90.

3. Arthur F. Kinney, *Shakespeare by Stages: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 81-82.

4. Herman, 91.

5. David Bevington, *Shakespeare: The Seven Ages of Human Experience* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 73.

6. Herman, 96.

7. Ibid.

8. Jill L. Levenson, "Romeo and Juliet Before Shakespeare," *Studies in Philology* 81, no. 3 (1984), 345.

9. J. J. Munro, *Brooke's* Romeus and Juliet *Being the Original of Shakespeare's* Romeo and Juliet (London: Chatto & Windus, 1908), 73.

10. Herman, 97.

11. Ibid.

12. James Patrick Nelson, e-mail message to author, June 15, 2010.

13. Lene Petersen, "De-composition in Popular Playtexts: A Revalidation of the Multiple Versions of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet," Oral Tradition* 23, no. 1 (2008): 134.

14. Herman, 98.