Milena M. Kaličanin¹
Jovana M. Zdravković²
University of Niš
Faculty of Philosophy

ROMANTIC LOVE AS A THREAT TO SOCIAL STABILITY
IN SHAKESPEARE’S ROMEO AND JULIET AND
ANOUILH’S ROMEO AND JEANETTE

Abstract: In this paper we focus on the comparative analysis between Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet and its modern version, Anouilh’s Romeo and Jeannette. Anouilh is a representative of modern playwrights who evoke Shakespeare in their argument that a number of structures in our society are enemies of the authentic individual. What they adopt from Shakespeare is the capacity of man to relate with the world in a loving way. We argue that Anouilh’s Romeo and Jeannette fits the template of Shakespeare’s Tragic Equation – the mythical pattern present in all of the Bard’s works, the tragedy of the Lover devoid of love. These works evoke Shakespeare’s warning: that modern society is not conducive of love. On the contrary, the system is based on the suppression of genuine human affection; its re-emergence would subvert the dominant power-relations. In the introduction, we attempt to define the notion of romantic love by referring to the works of Bloom, Illouz, Vyvyan, etc. The following two segments of the paper deal with the analysis of the romantic relationship in Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet and its modern evocations in the work of Anouilh. In the conclusion, the destructive tendencies of the (modern) patriarchal society are yet again highlighted and linked to Shakespeare’s warning and desire to make his audience and readers perceive, judge and finally condemn them.

Key words: romantic love, subversion, transgression, Romeo and Juliet, Romeo and Jeannette, Shakespeare, Anouilh.

¹mkostic76@gmail.com
²jolepaluljica91@gmail.com
**Introduction**

Harold Bloom insightfully remarks that love in Shakespeare's plays represents the only means to escape the power of social domination: “Love threatens society by asserting an untamed, nonconformist, individual will expressed in passionate desire” (Bloom 2005: 26). In the same vein, Vyvyan claims that love and love only, liberates the Shakespearean hero from the false identifications of impersonal social structures and concludes that it is no wonder then, that Shakespeare’s comic heroes are always lovers: their “highest duty... is neither to their parents nor to the law, but to love ... because love, and nothing else, will lead the soul to perfection”. (Vyvyan 1961: 12)

However, as Denis de Rougemont declares, it is not “happy love” that will lead the soul to perfection; furthermore, it has no history: “Romance only comes into existence where love is fatal, frowned upon and doomed by life itself. What stirs lyrical poets to their finest flights is neither the delight of the senses nor the fruitful contentment of the settled couple; not the satisfaction of love, but its passion. And passion means suffering. There we have the fundamental fact”. (De Rougemont 1983:15)

In order to illustrate the subversive quality of love in Shakespeare's work and its modern versions, the notion of romantic love should be clarified first.\(^3\) The term will be used here in the sense proposed by Illouz, who defines it as “a privileged site for the experience of utopia”, (Illouz 1997: 8). According to this view, the idea of romance has been geared towards transcending the mundane world and its grimy necessities and obligations, “while being elevated to the status of supreme value”, (Illouz 1997: 9). Illouz holds that romantic figures that haunt our imagination affirm the inalienable rights of passion and defy the normal arrangements and divisions by gender, class, or national loyalties. It logically follows that Romeo and Juliet gained fame not so much because of the intensity of their love, but because they braved their family disapproval, thus affirming the supremacy and righteousness of an individual’s passion against the abusive rules of the group.

The subversive quality of romantic love implies the rejection of everything considered reasonable and respectable within the social worldview. While lovers aim to reach the imagined unity of the souls, they try to achieve this by rejecting the rational code of conduct and replacing it with rules of their own creation. Love thus projects an aura of transgression and both promises and demands a better

\(^3\) Originally considered a uniquely European phenomenon (Stone 1989), more recent research has shown precursors and analogues of romantic love in Plato’s dialogues, Islamic culture, and ancient Indian writings.
world. For that reason love is perceived as “a subversive force threatening the legal and moral order.” (Illouz 1997: 9)

In accord with Illouz, Bloom asserts that:

Romantic love, as opposed to domestic or married love, is a rebellion against the social order and its established values, just as it is a rebellion against time and nature, against aging and alteration. Married love can be integrated into society; affirming and continuing it...Romantic love cannot be integrated in society. The opposition it faces must itself vanquish such love and the lovers must be parted, or it must be tamed into domesticity. If neither of this happens, if the consecration of the love can be neither the separation of the lovers nor marriage, then it must be death, for it is only the immobility of death that can cheat either society or time and nature. (Bloom 2005: 26)

On the other hand, in the Introduction to Renaissance Self-Fashioning (1980), Greenblatt claims that all subjects, including artists, are ideologically determined: religion, education, law, the family are the institutions that shape all individuals. Their subjectivities are constructed in accord with the cultural codes that suppress and control them. Thus, although the New Historicists criticize the Western ideology of power, they claim that neither the playwright nor his work can go beyond it. The only way of escape from cultural omnipotence is, according to Greenblatt, “the will to play” – to embrace what the culture finds loathsome and frightening and, although aware of one’s own inevitable fall, to glorify it for the sake of sheer anarchy which is in itself subversive.

This is definitely our point of disagreement with the New Historicists. We believe that a more positive resistance than mere self-destructive anarchic play to any kind of repressive ideology is not only possible, but also necessary. This belief in personal and social transformation reached by experiencing total, unconditional romantic love is definitely Shakespeare’s governing idea in Romeo and Juliet.

“A pair of star-crossed lovers”: Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet

To Frye (1986), Romeo and Juliet represents “a miniature version of what happens when feuding nobles get out of hand: there’s nothing but misery and chaos until a ruler appears who will...turn the nobles into courtiers dependent on the sovereign”, (Frye 1986: 15). Enmity, violence, and disorder permeate Romeo and Juliet, and they spring from a grudge. We never learn of the causes of the grudge that stands undefined and, for the meaning of the play, unimportant; however, its
effects constitute the anatomy of the play. It is within the context of this enmity, love’s contrast, that the love between Romeo and Juliet achieves its full intensity.

By giving away the plot and the end of the play in the Prologue, Shakespeare establishes the ambiguity between love and the grudge to support the idea that the lovers are essentially vulnerable in a wicked world. It is in light of this idea that Friar Laurence’s peculiar sermon is to be understood:

She’s not well married that lives married long,  
But she’s best married that dies married young. (IV, iv, 77-78)

If anything at all, this seems to be an implicit criticism of the effect that social institutions can have on love. A short marriage, by implication, is better than a long one because the passion of love is frozen into eternity rather than transformed into domesticity.

Indeed, Shakespeare made his best effort to emphasise that in the case of Romeo and Juliet it is social disorder rather than social order that stands opposed to their love. In the opening scene he hurls us into the world of violence, pride and vanity as he depicts the psychology of men who become involved in it. The scene begins on the streets of Verona where Sampson and Gregory, two of Capulet’s servants, armed “with swords and bucklers”, according to stage direction, seem to be hoping to encounter “a dog of the house of Montague” (I, i, 10), so they can provoke a quarrel. Quickly the two have exactly what they wanted - when servants of Montague appear the swords are out and a fight begins.

The incident is reflexive of the enmity between the families: a single insulting gesture provokes a quarrel that escalates rapidly until everyone is involved. The impression given by the opening is that the servants actually enjoy quarrelling: we do not know what their business in the streets is; they appear to be walking out in hope of finding something to do that gives them meaning and identity - an occasion to fight. We come to a realisation that the feud between the Capulets and Montagues has become a way of life, its meaning and origin long forgotten. Everything that happens later is shadowed by our awareness of the civil violence that has become the law, namely the law of patriarchy:

The fathers are the stars and the stars are the fathers in the sense that the fathers stand for the accumulated experience of the past, for tradition, for authority, and hence for the two most potent forces that mould and so impart ‘destiny’ to the child’s life.... heredity and training. The hatred of the hostile houses in Romeo and Juliet is an inheritance that every member of these families is born
into as truly as he is born with the name Capulet or Montague. (Goddard, quoted in Kahn 1977: 5)

That inheritance makes Romeo and Juliet tragic figures because it denies their natural needs and desires as youth. Indeed, critics generally agree that, “rather than static evocations of the spirit of ideal love”, the Bard undertakes to present Romeo and Juliet as “developing characters” — growing from thoughtless adolescence to the inescapable and painful realities of maturity”, (Evans 2003: 26). In this regard Kahn argues that they create and try to preserve the new identities as adults apart from the feud, but it blocks their every attempt. Thus the play suggests a critique of the feud as the medium through which criteria of patriarchy-oriented masculinity are voiced.

The lovers’ absence from the opening scene, especially Romeo’s, becomes significant when read in light of the nature of their love. Remarkably, Shakespeare makes his best effort to make sure that, once introduced to the play, Romeo is seen for whom he really is - a lover in a patriarchal society. When he appears wallowing in self pity over Rosaline who does not return his love, we begin to hear the voice of concern in his parents and his friend Benvolio, as, ironically, they worry over the problem of Romeo’s apparently anti-social behaviour. Indeed, feuding has become the normal social pursuit for young men in Verona. At the very opening of the play Shakespeare suggests its psychological function for them as a definition of manhood. As Evans puts it: “to participate in the feud is to choose death, to be masculine is to participate in the feud”. (Evans 2003: 50)

The conflict between Mercutio’s conception of manhood and the one that Romeo learns is suggested in Romeo’s line, “He jests at scars that never felt a wound”, (II, ii, 1). Mercutio considers love mere folly unworthy of a real man, and respects only the wounds suffered in combat. True to his genuine self, Romeo seeks manhood through love rather than through fighting. According to Kahn, Romeo’s challenge is to realise his true identity not through his socially assigned role as a son of Montague, but through the role of Juliet’s lover, in direct conflict with that role. It is the conflict between manhood as aggression on behalf of the father, and manhood as loving a woman, that is at the bottom of the tragedy.

Here it is worth noting that in loving Rosaline, Romeo’s private life is never affected and the question of loving the enemy never comes into play. Evans asserts that this is primarily because Romeo’s affection for Rosaline is in accordance with society’s conventions regarding love (Evans 2003: 11). Romeo fits well into the socially accepted role of a rejected lover worshipping his mistress and lamenting her indifference and there is nothing transgressive about his love for her. Thus, no
challenge is directed toward the system’s established relations. In this regard, Bloom states that Romeo’s passing love for Rosaline is merely an “adolescent attempt at the creation of an identity”, (Bloom 2005: 32). While in love with Rosaline, Romeo is acting the socially prescribed role based on a convention that holds that a woman is never to display any feelings she might cherish for her suitor.

Frye (1986) explains that “the lover is a slave of the God of Love, whose will is embodied in his mistress, and he is bound to do whatever she wants.” (Frye 1986: 20) Here we see culture at work: this ‘love’ fosters in man the fear of women, associating them with effeminacy and emasculation, while it links sexual intercourse with aggression and violence, rather than pleasure and love. What Mercutio finds exasperating about his friend is the transformation brought by “The God of Love”: love reduces his companion from self-confident masculinity to abject servility. Love is only manly, Mercutio hints, if it is aggressive and violent and consists of overpowering, rather than being overpowered by women:

If love be rough with you, be rough with love;
Prick love for pricking and you beat love down. (I, iv, 27-2)

Romeo claims to be in love, but in reality he is confused: “I have lost myself; I am not here; /This is not Romeo, he’s some other where”, (I, i, 188-9). In John Vyvyan’s words, “If Romeo has lost the reality of himself, then he has not found love”. (Vyvyan 1960: 147)

Romeo’s superficial love for Rosaline is a false start in the hero’s career of love. It serves as a foil for his sincere and genuine love for Juliet. On this contrast Evans writes:

...Shakespeare employs Romeo’s role as the lover in love with love (hence largely with himself) as a clearly realised foil to set off the new Romeo who begins to emerge after he meets Juliet and who loses his heart in a real love, the kind of love that is beyond the posturing of what may be expressed through the facile medium of mere sonnetese. (Evans 2003: 12)

The love Romeo bears for Juliet is no conventional love. It cuts through the old barriers of convention, and is founded on pure love, freedom, and reciprocity. There is nothing sadistic or dominating in his relationship with Juliet since she openly returns his feelings:

But to be frank and give it thee again,
And yet I wish but for the thing I have:
My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee
The more I have, for both are infinite. (II, ii, 131-135)

What Romeo and Juliet are for each other is inherently inimical to what they
must be, to be, as Mercutio tells Romeo, ‘sociable’ in Verona. In patriarchal Verona,
men bear names and stand to fight for them; women, “the weaker vessels,” bear
children and “fall backward” to conceive them, as the Nurse’s husband once told
the young Juliet. It is thus possible to see Romeo and Juliet as a battle between the
responsibilities and actions demanded by social institutions and those demanded
by the private desires of the individual. Romeo and Juliet’s appreciation of night,
with its darkness and privacy, make sense in the context of individuals who wish
to escape the public world.

To begin with, the Capulets’ desire to marry Juliet to the County Paris should
be understood within the cultural norms of arranged marriages. A Illouz (1997)
highlights:

In premodern Europe, endogamic rules not only confined the autonomy of
the individual but also regulated the exchange of wealth. Members of the
landed aristocracy married people of similar or superior birth and fortune in
order to maintain and increase their patrimony and social status... in such an
atmosphere “love was, for parental authority, the great enemy, the rebel likely
to cause disasters for all its projects”. (Illouz 1997: 10)

The relationship between Juliet and Lady Capulet reflects the social expectations
of women to help secure the family line. In their first scene together, Lady Capulet
asks Juliet, “How stands your disposition to be married?” (I, iii, 65). Even though
she demonstrates her filial duty in this scene, Juliet responds coyly, replying that
marriage is an “honour” that she “dream[s] not of” (I, iii, 66). Lady Capulet reminds
her that ladies younger than Juliet are already mothers and that she herself was a
mother at Juliet’s age. Paris, she tells her, “seeks you for his love,” and she urges her
daughter to love him; doing so will allow Juliet to “share all that he doth possess”,
both his fairness and, presumably, his wealth., (I, iii, 74, 93). She asks Juliet: “Speak
briefly, can you like of Paris’ love?” (I, iii, 96)

Like her husband, Lady Capulet suggests that love should be part of the marriage
equation, and the unspoken assumption is that Juliet will comply. In this scene, Juliet
is established both as dutiful daughter and as conventional lover. Her relationship
with Romeo overturns both of these conventions, as well as traditional hierarchies
within marriage. Juliet defies her parents’ expectations by selecting a husband not
of their choosing; to complicate matters further, he is a member of a rival family.
In her relationship with Romeo, Juliet is an active and equal - and perhaps even the dominant - partner. She is not the submissive wife concerned with preserving her family’s heritage. She says:

Juliet. 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 call’d,
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. (II, ii, 43-49)

In imagining a relationship with no names, no family history, and no outside influences, Juliet presents a view of marriage that defies the expectations of their parents and the society in which they live. She also departs from another view of women, the cruel and distant Petrarchan mistress found in poetic tradition. Schalkwyk insists that Juliet tries not to enslave Romeo, “but rather to divorce his body from the incorrigible force of his name as social appellation”, (Schalkwyk 2011: 135). Especially significant for him is that this is not so much a demand as it is a gift: Juliet offers to replace Romeo’s name and the social ties it stands for with “all” of herself. This is a form of role substitution, but it offers not the temporary replacement but rather the completeness of the self.

Juliet proposes marriage, presses Romeo to make the arrangements, and finally wishes she could do even more to assert herself. However, Juliet must face the consequences of her dissidence. Juliet’s relationship with her parents stresses not only her deviance from tradition but also a broader cultural critique of arranged marriage. Capulet, not knowing that his daughter has already chosen her own mate, is shocked when his wife informs him that Juliet has refused the marriage to Paris. His response is a series of questions, as if he cannot believe what he is hearing:

How? Will she none? Doth she not give us thanks?
Is she not proud? Doth she not count her blest,
Unworthy as she is, that we have wrought
So worthy a gentleman to be her bride? (III, v, 142-5)

This speech reveals the expectations placed on daughters: they should be thankful for and proud of their fathers’ choices. A daughter is “unworthy” of independent choice and should conform to her father’s idea of worthiness. In this scene, Juliet is no longer “the hopeful lady of my earth,” a beloved daughter whose consent matters. (I, ii, 15) Now, the disobedient Juliet is “a wretched puling fool /
A whining mammet” (III, iv, 183-4). Capulet will listen to neither his wife, nor to his daughter who begs him on her knees, nor to the Nurse. After all, he has spent “Day, night, hour, tide, time, work, play... to have her matched”, (III, iv, 176-8). If she refuses to acknowledge this hard work, she can “hang, beg, starve, die in the streets”, (III, iv, 192). But the threat never deters Juliet, and she never questions the rightness of her commitment.

Throughout Shakespeare’s play, Juliet stresses that her love for Romeo is more important than anything else. She tells Friar Laurence that, rather than marry Paris, she is willing to do “things that to hear them told have made [her] tremble / And [she] will do it without fear or doubt, / To live an unstained wife to [her] sweet love” (4.1.86-8). When she wakes and discovers Romeo’s dead body, Juliet scarcely hesitates to follow him in death: “Yea, noise? Then I’ll be brief. O happy dagger! / This is thy sheath; there rust, and let me die”, she says, and stabs herself. (5.3.169-70) Juliet’s swift action demonstrates her commitment to her husband; willing to endure unimaginable horrors for the possibility that she will be reunited with Romeo, his death prompts her to commit suicide as a sign of her belief in the sanctity of marriage, a marriage she has chosen for herself. She will not flee Verona and hide as a nun in a convent, as Friar Laurence suggests. She will not submit to her parents’ authority and marry Paris. She will not follow the Nurse’s advice and seek a marriage more desirable than her first. Instead, she will keep her wedding vow to Romeo, showing her parents and the rest of the world that love of one’s spouse is more important than social or familial expectations. One could argue that Juliet’s suicide allows her to escape from a world that would require her to follow one of these pathways, which is true. Her words and actions throughout the play, however, demonstrate that Juliet consistently makes brave and independent choices, and so the decision to kill herself preserves her integrity; it is not a mere escape. Because of this, Juliet serves as a model of youthful independence and the ideal lover, to whom statues will be built. She demonstrates that a committed and loving marriage trumps the feudal authority of family lineage and the social authority of the state.

It is not until Romeo meets Juliet that he truly understands the meaning of love. This love makes him want to escape from the destructive confines of
household rivalry, even if that involves humiliation in the eyes and enemies alike. Schalkwyk observes:

Women can be contained while they serve as objects of negotiation between men. But when they exert some kind of agency, refusing to be mere counters in the patriarchal game, they become transgressive, disruptive agents. (Schalkwyk 2011: 118)

By marrying one another, Romeo and Juliet refuse to adhere to the feud. Consequently, their marriage undermines and defies the authority of the feud, which is the major governing force in Verona. Instead of relying on violence, the law of patriarchy, they rely on love and freedom, thus placing themselves outside the law and becoming inimical to it. Their love becomes subversive since it transgresses the underlying power relations of patriarchy, and hence comes to be seen as a threat. As Barthes comments in A Lover’s Discourse (1978), “the gesture of the amorous embrace seems to fulfil, for a time, the subject’s dream of total union with the loved being: the longing for consummation with the other... In this moment, everything is suspended: time, law, prohibition: nothing is exhausted, nothing is wanted: all desires are abolished, for they seem definitively fulfilled... A moment of affirmation; for a certain time, though a finite one, a deranged interval, something has been successful...” (Barthes 1978:21) However, as soon as Romeo falls in love with Juliet, the feud moves into action to eliminate the threat and this is done through Tybalt. It is no exaggeration to say that from this point on the play turns into tragedy. The maintenance of masculine honour forces Romeo to commit actions he would prefer to avoid. But the social emphasis placed on masculine honour is so profound that Romeo cannot simply ignore it. The feud reinforces masculine identities as sons by allying them with their paternal household against another paternal household, thus polarising all their social relations, in terms of filial allegiance. Men are constantly called upon to defend their name. (Kahn 1977: 6)

After Tybalt insults Romeo and challenges him to a duel, Romeo tries to do just the opposite, by oblique protestations of love to Tybalt, which must seem quite mysterious to him. No wonder Mercutio terms Romeo’s reluctance to fight a “calm, dishonourable, vile submission”, (III, i, 44) and draws on Tybalt: Romeo has allowed a Capulet to insult his name, his paternal heritage, his manhood, without fighting for them.

When Mercutio dies, Juliet drops out of Romeo’s mind, for the first time since he saw her, and all he can think of now is vengeance on Tybalt for his friend’s death. He instantly turns against Juliet and sees her as Mercutio sees all women:
O sweet Juliet,
Thy beauty hath made me effeminate,
And in my temper softened valor’s steel! (III, i, 111-117)

At that moment he resumes the conventional identity as the successor of the house of Montague, and vows revenge on Tybalt. As Kahn remarks, “Romeo’s challenge of Tybalt is not merely an instance of a rashness which fatally flaws his character ... on the contrary, it is an action first avoided, then deliberately undertaken, and it is entirely expected of him by his society’s code”. (Kahn 1977: 8)

Male law overrides love of women, and here lies tragedy: by killing Tybalt and avenging Mercutio, Romeo becomes irrevocably a tragic figure. In this respect Hughes asserts that in Shakespeare’s tragedies the moment of crisis – the hero’s loss of faith in life – coincides with the loss of faith in the Female. Hence “the tragic error belongs exclusively to the psychology of the man”. (Hughes 1992: 119)

Ironically, his attempts at peacemaking only draw him into feud. Applebaum (1997) asserts that against the social norms embodied in the person of the Prince, the play juxtaposes the inward experience of failed normativity and represents this failure as the structure of life among its tragic men. Applebaum writes:

Against the backdrop of an assured masculine order... they experience their own pressures to perform as imperatives to achieve the impossible, to end a cycle of repetition by means of repetition. The fathers cannot enforce the law so long as they themselves are living in a self-imposed condition of “mutiny” or “rebellion,”... Insofar as they attempt to enforce the law for their fathers, the sons are in effect acting in the interest of a false law... (Applebaum 1997: 268)

Significantly, while Shakespeare is careful to make Romeo just as culpable for the tragedy as Mercutio or Tybalt, Juliet remains radically free of flaw. “Though it is The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet... Shakespeare sees to it that our larger loss is the loss of Juliet”. (Bloom 2005: 9)

Critics agree that Juliet is a stronger personality than Romeo and that she wins through to maturity more quickly. Juliet’s coming of age is coupled with an increasing isolation, which separates her from friends and family, and leaves her, after Romeo’s banishment, almost entirely on her own. As she develops from childhood to adulthood she strips herself of former confidents one by one, as each appear to betray her. First she is forced to reject her parents who blindly insist on her marrying Paris; then she must estrange herself from the Nurse who cheerfully urges her to commit bigamy. In a way, she too is “banished” by the Prince’s edict. At this point she is able to say:
I’ll to the Friar to know his remedy;
If all else fail, myself have power to die. (III, v, 242-243)

All of her future actions grow out of the commitment expressed in that last line – she never turns back.

Romeo’s final commitment is achieved only after he believes Juliet to be dead: “Is it e’en so? Then I defy you, stars!”, (V, I, 24). He no longer conceives his course of action as a way of circumventing the feud, which is now of no importance for him. With Juliet dead, as he believes, there is nothing left worth living for, and we can now accept his determination to die for love as the supreme expression of a commitment that, like Juliet’s, “is as boundless as the sea”. To put it in Khan’s words:

Between Romeo’s banishment and their deaths, both learn in different ways that... the spirit can change reality. Juliet becomes a woman and Romeo a man... by action undertaken in a transformed sense of the self-requiring courage and independence. (Kahn 1977: 11)

When Shakespeare describes Romeo and Juliet’s love as “death mark’d”, one is prepared for the tragic resolution of the play. The inevitability of death is highlighted in the opening lines of the play when they are introduced as “star-crossed lovers,” indicating they will fall in love despite its destined doom. In this regard, John Lawlor sees the play as one which “does not minimise, much less cancel,” the power of Fate, but which “denies her an entire victory” (Lawlor 1961: 127). When Romeo says, “Well, Juliet, I will lie with thee to- night” (V, i, 36), as her lover and bridegroom he assumes his role in the love-death, but that love-death is not merely fated; it is willed. Accordingly, the context in which we have been led to understand and expect the lovers’ death is transformed. Choosing to die for their love, Romeo and Juliet may be seen as defying the stars in an assertion of personal will and finding a way, through death, to eternal union. As Frye summarises:

Romeo and Juliet are sacrificial victims, and the ancient rule about sacrifice was that the victim had to be perfect and without blemish. The core of reality in this was the sense that nothing perfect or without blemish can stay that way in this world, and should be offered up to another world before it deteriorates... Our perception of this helps us to accept the play as a whole, instead of feeling only that a great love went wrong. It didn’t go wrong: it went only where it could, out. It always was, as we say, out of this world. (Frye 1986: 32)

To conclude, Romeo and Juliet is the anatomy of the effects of the grudge; not its cause. Its cause lies in the opposition between “the imaginative vision its protagonists bear witness to in love and the truth of a world whose order must be enforced at love’s expense.” (Snow 1993: 371)
“I don’t want to grow up”: Anouilh’s *Romeo and Jeannette*

As Pronko (1968) elaborates, in Anouilh’s dramatic works humanity is composed of two kinds of people: the mass of rational non-entities who accept the banality of human existence and the ‘heroes’. The first group is motivated chiefly by a desire for happiness and material pleasures, and performs the daily routine of a humdrum human existence. The second group, that of heroes and heroines, rejects the banality of everyday existence. The members of this group realise the imperfection of the human lot and they revolt against life and its petty pleasures. Their attitude is governed by an ideal system of values, arbitrary and subjective, intolerant and intransigent, which leads them to reject happiness, hope and even life itself, if these are only to be had by means of compromise.

Unlike the ‘mediocre’ man, Anouilh’s hero is unable to accept the society of which he is a part. Because of his quest for purity unattainable in the material world, Anouilh’s hero refuses to compromise with men and the world in which he lives. Generally speaking, he revolts against an impure world—a world of egoists and hypocrites, a world of social caste, a world in which a pure love relationship cannot exist. Finally, Anouilh’s hero rejects life, because he believes that it taints and corrupts everything that is pure.

*Romeo and Jeannette* follows a familiar pattern of Anouilh’s tragedy: intense happiness in love is experienced by two characters, who in their absorption with each other seem to cut themselves off from ordinary material existence and to inhabit an idealised dream world of their own creation. Although indicative of Shakespeare, the title suggests that Anouilh does not follow the Bard’s narrative too closely.

The evocation of Shakespeare’s virtuous heroine in the character of Jeannette’s sister Julia points out the distinction. Julia’s “notion of honour” is reduced to “rubbing away tirelessly at the same little corner, day in, day out, for years and years”, like her mother-in-law-to-be and the rest of the housewives who are “…scrubbing and scouring away in the kitchen, thinking they hold the key to Truth like a handle of a saucepan, not suspecting a thing.” (Anouilh 1958: 290)

Anouilh redefined tragedy by choosing to do away with the figure of a conventional heroine. In his theatre, occupying the place of conventionally desirable woman is a creature so devoid of conventional femininity, so free, that she might more reasonably be called anti-heroine. Unlike her sister whose idea of happiness is to preserve routine—“the same old things, going on day in, day out like the ticking of the clock” (Anouilh 1958: 279),
Jeannette is in search of genuine happiness. At the same time, her behaviour and character are socially unacceptable:

‘... she [Jeannette] makes hats and dresses out of bits of old material, the way she did when she was small... She makes most of her frocks out of old curtains. And no sooner are they finished than there’s a dirty mark or a scar somewhere, and if her behind shows through or her knees poke out of her stockings — well, so what?’ (Anouilh 1958: 268)

Personifying Anouilh’s typical heroine, Jeannette basically remained a little girl who would not grow up. Accordingly, Anouilh uses every opportunity to remind us of the heroine’s age. This twenty-something girl is a symbol; a symbol of youth so prominent in Anouilh’s dramatic works. Twenty years is the age when one is full of idealism and illusions; the age when one acts by instinct, without the need to learn by experience. It is the age that requires a life consistent with its childhood dream.

Jeannette refuses to accept the truth already enunciated by Frederic:

‘People have to get old. They have to grow out of the world of childhood and accept the fact that things are not so pretty as when they were young.’

‘I don’t want to grow up. I don’t want to accept. Everything’s so ugly’. (Anouilh 1958: 336)

Apart from the tendency to idealise, Anouilh’s heroine has all the other characteristic features of the age of adolescence. She feels alone and misunderstood. At the beginning of the play she is cynical and unconventional but, behind her manifest ‘freedom’, traces of bitterness and despair can be detected:

‘Listen to what your daughter has to say. Your bad daughter. Not the other one. She never says shameful things that burn when they are spoken. She always does the right thing, and she’s going to get her reward. She’s going to be happy. She won’t need just the memory of one evening, later on. She’ll have the right to every evening, every day, every minute – the right to a whole lifetime’. (Anouilh 1958: 285)

What Anouilh conveys is that adolescence is the dangerous age where one makes a difficult transition from childhood to maturity, the age when one asks agonising questions. That is why it is always the young who are the heroes of his plays full of metaphysical anguish.

Jeannette is a ‘primitive’ being who acts by instinct. She distrusts intelligence. She does not want to understand the world’s ways because to understand is to excuse, and to excuse is to compromise:
Romantic Love as a Threat to Social Stability in Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet and Anouilh’s Romeo and Jeanette

‘When I’m old and understand everything like other people I shall say that, too, I know. That nothing is anyone’s fault. It must be fine to suddenly become tolerant about everything; to go about excusing everything; not to kick anymore.’ (Anouilh 1958: 283)

Anouilh believes in the ‘noble savage’ of Rousseau. For him, we begin our lives as pure and untainted, but society corrupts us gradually making us hypocrites and petty. Jonathan Swift gives a description of Anouilh’s basic thoughts:

In the beginning were purity and happiness; they remain the axis of Anouilh’s theatre, and our misfortune, suffering and malaise are the result of falling outside the orbit of their power. We have rejected the natural order by growing up to worship false values, to compromise, to lie, sin, be sophisticated... (Swift 1960: 182)

This concept of one’s true self is the significant legacy of Shakespeare. It must never be compromised for it would cause the loss of ‘complete being’. In these terms Jeannette is symbolic of Hughes’s (1992) Goddess:

‘I’d like to have been a real wood nymph, sitting all by myself up in the branches, with my hair all tangled, shouting insults at people.’ (Anouilh 1958: 302)

Frederic’s mother is the evidence of what society and culture do to a woman. The sense of duty and hard-working numbed her senses and emotions. She is a woman holding a knife and slaughtering an innocent living being with no mercy. The image of woman, once an epitome of “fertility, reproduction, and renewal of life”, (Hughes 1992: 58), has been reconstructed as to fit the moral standards of society. And when a woman fails to fit these standards, a man is left alone with nothing but his rage and frustration.

Even Jeannette’s brother, Lucien, although presented as an intellectual type, categorically denies the possibility of love in life. Disappointed in women, and disillusioned with life, he shuts himself up in his room, where he spends his days reading. Although a man of learning, he cannot find a way to overcome his feeling of being ‘a cuckold’, another trait of Shakespearean legacy, and make a fresh start. On the contrary, his frustration makes him so embittered that his only solution is to isolate himself from the fallen modern world altogether:

‘The wilds for me, and good, black, primitive Negroes with heads thick as boulders and no idea, but absolutely no idea, what love is. Not a white within four hundred miles.’ (Anouilh 1958: 277)
Following Shakespeare’s pattern, the lovers meet and experience the unsuspected feeling that leads them into realising that they have never loved before. Juliet exclaims:

‘I love him! It’s for him I want to sacrifice myself and die. This isn’t the sort of love that’ll come surging up again like sap every time my waistline gets thick. It’s the first and last time, I know it, till the skin of my stomach clings to my spine’. (Anouilh 1958: 316)

Similarly, Anouilh’s modern Romeo unexpectedly finds what love is all about not in his relationship with the conventional Julia he is about to marry, but in her scandalously unconventional sister. This “well-educated type, as they call it... frank, loyal, honest, clear, go-ahead... proper little soldier” (Anouilh 1958: 270), defines this newly discovered feeling in Act III:

‘I am contented. Not the way I was hoping for— but differently. With the sort of contentment you feel when you’ve arrived somewhere, even if it should be the pit of despair; when you can say: Oh, good, this is it. I’m there. (Anouilh 1958: 308)

In Anouilh’s opus, love is imagined as a state of such Shakespearean content, as the place that is ‘it,’ as the feeling that one has ‘arrived,’ as the true home that many never find.

From the moment that Romeo and Jeannette meet, they attempt to find happiness in a pure love relationship and to seal themselves off from the realities of the everyday world. For a short while, love blinds the couple to reality, makes them happy, and transfigures everything that surrounds them. After their first night of love in a deserted shed in the woods, however, Frederic develops an obsession to penetrate every secret of Jeannette’s soul, and questions her about her past. As a result, she remembers how she wallowed in vice with her previous lovers and feels unworthy of Frederic’s love:

‘I suddenly felt ashamed of belonging to him... Yesterday I didn’t care. I didn’t care about anything— about having a lover like him or about going about with bare legs and a torn frock and being plain’. (Anouilh 1958: 287)

She attempts, in vain, to reject her memories of her miserable past: the white gown, which she wears for Frederic is symbolic of her attempt to cover up reality. However, when Lucien comes to the shed, the past comes alive in the present and ruins her love relationship with Frederic:
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Frederic belongs to another world, different from hers. She lives in a world of freedom, imagination, free-will, defiance and passion. On the other hand, Frederic’s ideal world is that of order and convention. He says: “It had to be your eyes that I daren’t look into, your straggly hair, your urchin face and your eyes. Everything I don’t like I had to love”. (Anouilh 1958: 287)

Jeannette cannot escape the memories of her own sordid past. What she is trying to avoid is the life of petty compromise and boring mediocrity she would have shared with Frederic should they had stayed together. Jeannette would eventually be forced to compromise with the world by lying about what she did in the past and Frederic would become hardened. Ultimately, life would not have allowed their love to escape: it too would have disappeared as though they had never meant to each other. As Lucian puts it:

‘The game’s up in advance.’

‘But why?’

‘Because she’s a woman. Because we’re alone in the world. Because one night in a month or a year, or ten years from now, when you think you’re holding your little mate in your arms, you’ll suddenly realise you’re like everybody else; that it’s only a woman you’ve got in your arms, there’s nothing there... Marry Julia. Have children. Become a man.’ (Anouilh 1958: 299)

Unable to bear the weight of the truth about her past and, realising that she can never know Frederic in a state of purity, Jeannette flees and marries the rich Monsieur Azrias. Lucien is there to rationalise Frederic’s agony:

‘It hurts, doesn’t it, at first? You have the feeling you just can’t stand the pain another second. You ought really to yell out or to break something. But what? You can’t break them. How about the furniture! Grotesque. It’s when you realise there’s nothing to break that you begin to grow up. You can live comfortably in pain, you know. You’ll see when you get to know it”. (Anouilh 1958: 323)

At this point in the play, Frederic recreates his old self and decides to marry Julia. He enumerates all the trivial things that wait for him in his future life: “I shall have work to do. I shall marry Julia. I’ve got a whole house to decorate and a garden to clear and wood to cut for the winter”. (Anouilh 1958: 324)
Milena M. Kaličanin, Jovana M. Zdravković

Anouilh treats love not as individual matter but as a social phenomenon portraying individual’s inability to rise above his environment. The individual does not try to reform the society but merely create within that society a temporary escape from reality and to find within it the truth by which he can live. Implicit from the beginning is that the lovers are doomed. There is no development of action because doom is inevitable. Lawson was right to observe that “the only willing act on the part of the lovers is their final decision to die together”. (Lawson 1961: xi)

Upon realisation that it is life itself which prevents the perfection of love, Jeannette offers to make the love eternal by dying with Frederic:

‘I’m everything you hate again, and I can’t even be your wife! But if you like, there is something I can do tonight, so as to make it last forever in spite of everything, and that’s die with you.’ (Anouilh 1958: 335)

First he refuses, but when he sees Jeannette advancing to the tide, he rushes to share her fate. Rather than continue living in a world of compromise and deceit, Frederic decides to join Jeannette in death, the only solution offered by Anouilh to those who are in search of absolute purity. Frederic rejects the vulgar happiness of a life, which demands compromise as its price. He rejects life and confirms his entry into Anouilh’s ‘heroic’ race.

Jeannette’s brother and father watch as the pair walk out across the sands to be engulfed by the tide. Through Lucien’s words the contrast between the true couple and those who go on living is emphasised. As the play ends, he says sadly:

“Love, sad love, are you satisfied? Dear heart, dear body, dear romance. Aren’t there jobs to do, books to read, houses to build? Aren’t there other good things in life too: sunshine on flesh, cool wine in the glass, spring water, shade at midday, a fire in winter, the snow and even the rain, and the wind, and the trees and the clouds and the animals— all the innocent animals —and children before they become too ugly? Tell me, sad love, isn’t everything good?”. (Anouilh 1958: 339-340)

Transfigured by mutual love, Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet create new identities and subsequently subvert the power of society over themselves. Unable to enjoy a pure love relationship in the world that Anouilh presents, his protagonists “say no, not only to reality, but to life itself... for it will sully the pristine purity of their true selves”, (Pronko 1968: 34). Pronko, however, builds on this idea. He insists that Anouilh’s heroes “gave some semblance of meaning to life by making it the means through which they realised themselves, by their very refusal of it”. (Pronko 1968: 55)
The past, Anouilh preaches, is not all that can dominate a character’s life and determine his course of action. Any powerful vision can. Harvey (1964) expresses this idea in the following manner:

Throughout the plays— and Anouilh has shown remarkable consistency here—it is not violent actions which in turn precipitate violence and prod the characters on to peaks of emotion; it is instead a mental image which motivates them: the dream of a perfect love, a rankling memory, the anticipation of a joy that will never be, the hallucination of an unbearable horror. A climax may be assiduously and logically prepared, but it is invariably triggered by a precise vision in someone’s mind. (Harvey 1964: 125)

To the typical Anouilh’s hero only the ideal is acceptable; non-being is preferable to an imperfect life. The essence of their heroism consists in their attempt to be true to an ideal, to defend the integrity of their personality against the corruption, compromises and hypocrisy of the world they lived in.

Conclusion

Juliet’s casual “what’s in a name” epitomises the very essence of romantic love: it shakes off all conventions, and what remains are two persons and their involvement in love. Through the lovers’ words Shakespeare suggests that their public identity is extraneous and accidental, no part of what they really are. Following Shakespeare’s pattern Anouilh conveys the message that, if a young love resolves the inner civil war and reconstitutes, heals and makes whole what has been dissociated, then the outside troubled world, too, has a chance of survival.

Both Shakespeare and Anouilh question the nature of patriarchal culture and its conduciveness to love. They want contemporary society to perceive how much it has failed, both on an individual and social level, to help contemporary society go through self-revelation, just like their heroes did. They tell us that we have a choice – we can be like Anouilh’s mass that adjusts to injustice, or be like heroes of Shakespeare’s plays who refuse to adjust to it.

It is Shakespeare’s imperative to show that the role of art is not only to amuse, but rather to provoke critical consciousness and in that way prevent the loss of human conscience, which is necessary for the survival of human kind – that is why Shakespeare explores the same theme in his plays – interpreting destructive processes done by patriarchal authorities resulting in the blindness of an uncritical mind, as well as presenting the alternatives – which are, despite all, still possible.
Bibliography

ROMANTIČNA LJUBAV KAO PRETNJA
DRUŠTVENOJ STABILNOSTI U ŠEKSPIROVOJ
DRAMI ROMEO I JULIJA I ANUJEVOJ DRAMI
ROMEO I ŽANETA

Rezime


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