Critical Essays on
ROMEO AND JULIET

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SHAKESPEARE'S
Romeo and Juliet

edited by
JOSEPH A. PORTER

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Critical Essays on SHAKESPEARE'S *Romeo and Juliet*

CRITICAL ESSAYS ON BRITISH LITERATURE

Zack Bowen, General Editor
University of Miami

For that gallant spirit,
Yves Orvoën

General Editor's Note

The Critical Essays on British Literature series provides a variety of approaches to both classical and contemporary writers of Britain and Ireland. The formats of the volumes in the series vary with the thematic designs of individual editors, and with the amount and nature of existing reviews and criticism, augmented, where appropriate, by original essays by recognized authorities. It is hoped that each volume will be unique in developing a new overall perspective on its particular subject.

Joseph Porter's general introduction and prefatory notes to each section augment a selection of essays at the very core of current Shakespearean critical debate. The essays are divided into three sections: the first on Mercutio as a key to the shifting issues and scholarly attention, the second dealing with the sexual aspects of the text, and the third with the new focus on the meaning of Shakespeare's revisions and variations as the key to his composition process.

The book concludes with Donald Foster's new and groundbreaking computer-assisted analysis of the text(s). The essay, written especially for this volume, dates Shakespeare's acquisition of verbal constructions and signifiers, producing convincing cases regarding influences and the chronology of their adaptions in the play, and certifying his comparisons to sources both for the original texts and subsequent revisions.

ZACK BOWEN
University of Miami

Publisher's Note

Producing a volume that contains both newly commissioned and reprinted material presents the publisher with the challenge of balancing the desire to achieve stylistic consistency with the need to preserve the integrity of works first published elsewhere. In the Critical Essays series, essays commissioned especially for a particular volume are edited to be consistent with G. K. Hall's house style; reprinted essays appear in the style in which they were first published, with only typographical errors corrected. Consequently, shifts in style from one essay to another are the result of our efforts to be faithful to each text as it was originally published.

Contents

General Editor's Note ix
Publisher's Note xi
Introduction 1
JOSEPH A. PORTER

MERCUTIO REVENANT 5

The Moral Tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* 7
CLIFFORD LEECH

Mercutio's Brother 23
JOSEPH A. PORTER

Mercutio's Shakespeare 32
JOSEPH A. PORTER

THE TEXT SEXED 45

The Sonnet's Body and the Body Sonnetized in *Romeo and Juliet* 47
GAYLE WHITTIER

The Name of the Rose in *Romeo and Juliet* 64
CATHERINE BELSEY

Romeo and Juliet's Open Rs 82
JONATHAN GOLDBERG

TRACING THE AUTHORIAL MIND 97

"Tragical Mirth": From *Romeo* to *Dream* 100
AMY J. RIESS AND GEORGE WALTON WILLIAMS

Shakespeare at Work: *Romeo and Juliet* 107
E. PEARLMAN

The Webbing of *Romeo and Juliet* 131
DONALD W. FOSTER

Index 151

Introduction

JOSEPH A. PORTER

These essays continue a discourse extending from "earliest times" into the foreseeable future, about conflicts between individual experience and the social web of group claims of gender, family, class, and state, claims codified in the institution of European bourgeois marriage, as focused in and on an epochal love tragedy written four centuries ago by a youngish recent transplant to London who had begun to shift allegiance from narrative and lyric verse to verse drama, and who may even then have had inklings of how decisively this play would intervene in hearts and minds.

The play concerns matters of the most enduring timeliness, which in 1590s England grow especially urgent, in part because of the new prominence and flux of the institution in question. Today in Western (and above all U.S.) culture, that institution, where increasingly adversarial forces of the secular and the religious square off, finds itself under unprecedented pressure, outside the law to maintain its value and status, inside the law to rationalize its privileges, and, whether within or without the law, either to justify or end its exclusion of all but female-male pairings. And similarly with another major concern of the play, which has been variously termed the modern Western subject, or individuality, or consciousness of self: arguably nascent in 1590s England, it finds itself under many sorts of siege throughout the West at the end of the twentieth century.

However, despite the enduring and now acute importance of matters this play engages, and despite the play's steady popularity, judicious observers have nearly all placed it below the first rank of Shakespeare's plays. Even those who most love and admire *Romeo and Juliet* typically feel obliged to excuse such perceived deficiencies as a certain thinness in the main plot, or an intermittently uncertain control of tone. In fact, with no other Shakespeare play is there so great an apparent disproportion between the work's intrinsic excellence or worth and its importance.

Few other Shakespeare plays besides *Hamlet* have so wide (if sometimes shallow) a currency in the general public mind, where "To be or not to be" may be rivaled in familiarity by Shakespeare's most misquoted and misunderstood line, "Oh Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo." The play's prominence in the public consciousness stems in part of course from its regularly being set as the introductory taste of Shakespeare for U.S. secondary

schoolers, who may be assumed to thrill especially to a tale of young passion. But the warmth of audience response to *Romeo and Juliet,* from the 1590s to the present, has finally to do with the importance of the play's subject, with what the play addresses, with its remarkable reach and the unsettling conclusions it suggests, for all its deficiencies.

As has been said in the past, here in *Romeo and Juliet* Shakespeare first outdistances his early rival Christopher Marlowe. The nature of that outdistancing, which entails declining the Marlovian trajectory and marking out directions untried by Marlowe, is currently much in view in Shakespeare study, in part because of upheaval and revision in the understanding of Marlowe, catalyzed by widespread acknowledgment of his sexuality. The traditional assessment of this particular facet of *Romeo and Juliet*—that Shakespeare here bypasses Marlowe in giving rein to his own distinctive sympathy for the naïve, the doomed, the idiosyncratic—while true, only begins, we now believe, to tell the story that several of the present essays advance.

Furthermore (as again these essays unfold in new ways), Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet* decisively breaks free (with the occasional later relapse) from a hold that nondramatic verse has on him heretofore. Shakespeare here throws off the shackles of the hierarchy that ranked Petrarchan and other lyric verse above verse drama. Concerning these matters, the relation of *Romeo and Juliet* to the sonnet tradition and to Shakespeare's own sonnets has traditionally been seen as important. Now that the accepted date for the bulk of Shakespeare's sonnets has moved forward, *Romeo and Juliet* may be seen to figure differently. Indeed we may now see the sonnets more clearly as capitalizing on advances made in *Romeo and Juliet,* to surpass Petrarch, Sidney, and others, not by continuing in mapped directions but by turning aside and breaking through into the vexed subjectivity that comes to be called modern, perhaps first broached in the young lovers' soliloquies, and with it the vexed modern sensitivity to otherness that may have its uncanny birth in Romeo's wondering recollection of the apothecary in act 5, scene 1.

Yet even though the play's importance may outweigh its intrinsic merit, that importance entails considerable merit. And certainly despite certain deficiencies—of youth, really, and of the last vestiges of apprenticeship—all the world knows that *Romeo and Juliet* is mostly very fine indeed, and sometimes breathtaking.

The earliest of the essays collected here is from 1976, and all the others are from the past decade, so that the collection participates in and exemplifies the rich diversity of current Shakespeare study. Several particular critical discourses evident in current ways of coming to terms with *Romeo and Juliet* are variously manifest here. The older of these, Foucauldian, Derridean, new historicist, and cultural materialist discourses, now somewhat taken for granted as features of the critical landscape, variously contribute to these essays.

More prominently, perhaps, these essays address two topics that have recently heated up. One of these is Shakespeare's practice of composition, specifically his revisions, and also his witting or unwitting recycling of his own and others' words. Shakespearean revision has been on a front burner since the early eighties, when Stephen Urkowitz, Gary Taylor, Michael Warren, and others demonstrated that there are two authoritative texts of *King Lear.*[1]

Several of the following essays are germane to the question of Shakespeare's revision or reworking of *Romeo and Juliet.* Perhaps the most remarkable discoveries are those Donald W. Foster makes with Shaxicon, his electronic Shakespeare database. Illuminating Shakespeare's recycling of his own and others' language, Foster's discoveries are changing the very landscape of the subject of revision.[2]

The other front-burner topic (in Shakespeare study generally, and particularly with recent study of *Romeo and Juliet*) addressed by a number of these essays is that of sexuality and gender. Of course with the passion of Romeo and Juliet, and with the bawdiness of the Nurse and Mercutio, the subject has generally stayed in view in commentary. Still, the past decade or so has seen an unprecedented amalgam of psychoanalytic, cultural, feminist, and queer studies empowering discussion of the play.[3]

By virtue of the developments in both these currently very lively arenas, the textual and the sexual, it has very quickly—suddenly, even—come to seem possible to know the mind of William Shakespeare very much better than might have been suspected even as recently as 25 years ago.

The character Mercutio, as it happens, has some special prominence in both arenas, the textual because his Queen Mab speech seems to have been added after the play's first performances, and the sexual for reasons elaborated on by several of the essays to follow. Leech grants Mercutio still another kind of prominence. Indeed one distinguishing mark of *Romeo and Juliet* commentary of the past two decades is the unprecedented amount of attention given to Mercutio.

In selecting these essays (other than my own, which the General Editor suggested I include), I have been guided by timeliness and intrinsic merit, and also by variety of procedure. For instance, while some of the commentators maintain a tight focus (Riess and Williams, and Pearlman), others (Porter, and Belsey) in ranging more widely register the present importance of *Romeo and Juliet.* Another selection criterion has been the colloquy that collocation can foreground. All but one of these essays are separately accessible, and yet their present gathering provides access to what otherwise might, at least for the nonspecialist, remain practically inaccessible: the lively statement and response, agreement and disagreement in recent scholarly discourse, and even the occasional unexpected silence and failure of response.

Given how variously the essays overlap, and in some cases specifically address each other, a number of sequences might have made sense for this collection. The sequence chosen proceeds chronologically, but for a small switchback, from the earliest essay to the most recent. At the same time the essays make up three topical groups, with reevaluations under the aegis of Mercutio (Leech and Porter), followed by probes into newly accessible depths of textual sexuality (Whittier, Belsey, and Goldberg), and they by fresh vantage into the working of Shakespeare's mind (Riess and Williams, Pearlman, and Foster). None has been previously reprinted, and one (Foster) appears here for the first time.[4]

Notes

1. See Urkowitz, *Shakespeare's Revision of "King Lear"* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1980; and Taylor and Warren, eds., *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of "King Lear"* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983; reprint, Oxford: Clarendon, 1986). Since then, Grace Ioppolo, *Revising Shakespeare* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1991) surveys current evidence for revision in other Shakespeare plays, including *Romeo and Juliet*. In the spirit of the "new revisionism," as it has been called, John Jones, *Shakespeare at Work*, carries out minute scrutiny of numerous cases of apparent revision, including *Romeo and Juliet*. E. A. J. Honigman, *The Texts of "Othello" and Shakespearean Revision* (London: Routledge, 1996), argues that, with the two texts of *Othello* (and perhaps with other multitext plays), what in the present climate may seem instances of revision may in fact have other explanations.

2. Several complete editions of Shakespeare are now available in electronic form. The forthcoming Oxford *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Jill L. Levenson, is to have a complementary database on a World Wide Web site with information about cuts and staging in more than 170 extant promptbooks examined by Levenson. Foster, later in this volume, describes his powerful electronic Shaxicon, and the use he makes of the electronic *Oxford English Dictionary*, the Vassar English Text Archive, and the Chadwyck-Healey Full-Text Databases of English Poetry, English Verse Drama, and English Prose Drama.

3. An additional currently prominent critical discourse may seem somewhat slighted in this collection, namely, what has been called "performance criticism," which Harry Berger has called the new histrionicism. Nevertheless, performance is a concern in most of the commentary here gathered.

4. Electronic archives obviate compiling a traditional bibliography of commentary on *Romeo and Juliet*. Furthermore the essays collected here engage much other significant study of the play, and textual citations are indexed. However, it is worth mentioning three recent collections of essays on the play: *"Romeo and Juliet": Critical Essays*, ed. John F. Andrews (New York: Garland, 1993), *"Roméo et Juliette": Nouvelles Perspectives Critiques*, ed. Jean-Marie Maguin and Charles Whitworth (Montpellier: Publications de l'Université Paul-Valéry, 1993), and *Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet": Texts, Contexts, and Interpretation*, ed. Jay Halio (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995).

MERCUTIO REVENANT

Shakespeare's most substantial alteration of the tale he adapts from Arthur Brooke, *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet,* is his conversion of a story of love into a story of conflict between love and friendship, by dint of his radical development of the role of Mercutio. While the character has generally been a favorite, of audiences and players alike, his fortunes have varied more than those of other characters in the play. His bawdiness subjects him to extremes of censorship, cutting, and other sorts of denial through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and our present, more tolerant climate is allowing him to come into his own again. Other deeper cultural shifts may also be felt in Mercutio's recent ascendancy, as witness the first three essays gathered here, along with portions of those that follow.

We now can better see, in the light of Mercutio's ascendancy, how Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet* begins his decisive engagement of the mysteries of character and of death, and how here he frees himself from the specter of Christopher Marlow. And, to be sure, Mercutio in his ascendancy is changing how the titular characters (and all the other dramatis personae) now look, and how they affect and serve us.

Clifford Leech, "The Moral Tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet,*" situates the play in contexts of preceding English attempts at tragedy, particularly love-tragedy, and of early modern doctrines of love, and also in the context of Shakespeare's own later more fully realized tragedies. Leech argues that overall the play falls short of the full tragic effect because of its insistence that the deaths of the young lovers support a moral lesson. There is, however, according to Leech, "a small achieved tragedy embodied within this play" in the death of Mercutio.

The excerpts from my *Shakespeare's Mercutio: His History and Drama* constitute the ways into and out of a consideration of how Mercutio figures in the play's web of cultural negotiations. In "Mercutio's Brother," considering the "ghost character" of Valentine, I trace some characterological shifts that occur as Shakespeare adapts the plot of Brooke's poem to his own uses. In "Mercutio's Shakespeare" I address Mercutio's instrumentality in new roles Shakespeare now plays for us.

Clifford Leech (1909–1977), professor and administrator at universities including Durham and Ontario, author of many books on Shakespeare and other early modern drama, edited the New American Library *Two Noble Kinsmen* and the Arden *Two Gentleman of Verona* and served as General Editor (with T. W. Craik) of The Revels History of Drama in English series, 1958–1970.

In books and articles I, Joseph A. Porter, Professor of English at Duke University, have concerned myself with Shakespearean characterology and pragmatics.

The Moral Tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*

CLIFFORD LEECH

How adventurous Shakespeare was in writing *Romeo and Juliet* in 1594 or 1595 we do not always realize. First, there had been few tragedies written for the public theaters before then, and none in the first rank except Marlowe's. Shakespeare himself had doubtless already written *Titus Andronicus*, an exercise after Seneca and with many memories of Ovid. Kyd too had popularized Seneca in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Marlowe had had his imitators: Greene's *Alphonsus King of Aragon* had echoed the enthusiasm for the aspiring mind, but with none of the ambivalence that was deep in Marlowe. *Selimus*, which may also be Greene's, presented the other side of the picture—an Asian king who tyrannized and manifestly deserved to be destroyed. Marlowe's plays continued as a prominent part of the repertory, but only Shakespeare gives evidence of responding to their complexity.[1] Moreover, few tragedies before *Romeo and Juliet* had taken love as a central theme. It is true that *Dido Queen of Carthage*, attributed to Marlowe and Nashe on its title page of 1594 (where it was also declared to have been acted by the Children of the Queen's Chapel), was a play about love. But it is dubious whether we can accept this as a love-tragedy: "ironic comedy" would seem to fit it better.[2] It did indeed end with three deaths, and we must recognize that the idea of love leading to disaster was an occasional concern of the private stage in these years. *Gismond of Salerne* was acted at the Inner Temple in 1566 or 1568: it is a Senecan play, and the lovers never appear on the stage together. The lost *Quintus Fabius* of 1574, acted by the Windsor Boys at court, apparently had for its subject Xerxes' violent passion for the daughter of his sister-in-law.[3] Richard Edwardes's lost play *Palamon and Arcite* was acted at Christ Church, Oxford, before Elizabeth in 1566: coming from Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, its ending must have included destruction for one of the lovers. All these, however, clearly belong to the private stages. Arthur Brooke in the address to the reader prefixed to his poem *Romeus and Juliet* (1562) refers to having "lately" seen the story on the stage—there is no indication whether the stage referred

Clifford Leech, "The Moral Tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*," *English Renaissance Drama: Essays in Honor of Madeleine Doran and Mark Eccles*, ed. Standish Henning, Robert Kimbrough, and Richard Knowles.