

Staging Masculinities.

Romeo Montague: Innocent or Guilty? at the “Cesare Beccaria” Youth Detention Centre

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex representations of masculinity in *Romeo and Juliet*, examining how Shakespeare portrays young men caught between love, aggression and societal expectations. Through a close analysis of key characters such as Romeo, Mercutio, Benvolio and Tybalt, the study shows how their actions reflect different aspects of masculine identity, from romantic idealism to violent assertiveness. The play's depiction of the volatile nature of masculinity, influenced by family feuds and personal honour, provides a lens through which to understand the destructive consequences of rigid gender norms. By examining the tragic outcomes of these characters' lives, the paper links Shakespeare's portrayal of masculinity to contemporary issues such as gang violence and the pressure to conform to traditional male roles, offering insight into ways in which masculinity is constructed and challenged at the “Cesare Beccaria” youth detention centre.

Keywords: Shakespeare; *Romeo and Juliet*; masculinity; youth violence; masculine identity; gender; juvenile detention

Romeo Montague: Innocent or Guilty? A Collective Retelling of Romeo and Juliet

During the workshop we asked the twenty-five participants, made up of university students, young men in prison from the “Cesare Beccaria” Youth Detention Centre and members of the Puntozero company, to collaboratively write a new play, drawing on Shakespeare’s tragedy. On this occasion, we decided not to create an abridged version of the Shakespeare play, as we had done for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (2016) and *Sir Thomas More* (2019), but a retelling of the tragedy in modern Italian that would focus particularly on the figure of Romeo and the other young men in the play. We also decided on a significant spatial and temporal shift: the action would take place in a changing room, a prison and a law court in contemporary Milan.

Romeo Montague: Innocent or Guilty? is therefore a radical departure from the Shakespeare play, featuring scenes that don’t appear in Shakespeare. Instead of being sent into exile, as happens in *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo is arrested and finds himself in a cell, awaiting trial for Tybalt’s murder. In other scenes, the trial unfolds.

Curricula at the Beccaria Youth Detention Centre and at Milan State University

It’s worth underlining that the workshop, like the three preceding Shakespeare theatre workshops, is not an integral part of the prison curriculum, but are attended on a voluntary basis. Some of the young men are Italian, from different parts of Italy, others from countries around the world. They are frequently from deprived backgrounds and have had little formal education. For the university students, the Shakespeare workshop is likewise not a compulsory part of their academic curriculum (most of them study Languages and Literatures, some, the Law), but if they sign up, they receive credits for their attendance. Unlike the people inside the prison, these students hold a secondary school diploma, which has given them access to university. By joining the workshop, participants show their willingness to be part of a challenging process; they work as active members of a mixed group, made up of people, often, very different from themselves, with respect to social class, education and ethnicity. As team leaders, we

encourage the attendees to work creatively, either individually or in small groups, so helping them learn creative writing and performance skills, often for the first time.

Aims of the Workshop

As leaders, we believe that our drama workshops can bring about a positive change in participants. There are of course ample studies on the positive impact of drama workshops on individuals of all ages and the behavioural changes they can bring about in very different settings (see Pietro Barone's chapter). However, I feel, as in many things, that Shakespeare and other thinkers of his day got there first. We know that Shakespeare read Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and was fascinated by ideas of change and mutability that surface in many of his plays. In *Romeo and Juliet* Friar Lawrence puts forward a view of human nature and the world that is not an essentialist one. He reminds us that every animate and inanimate thing in the world is both good and bad, and subject to change. It is actually the way we perceive the natural world and the people living there, the manner we treat and use them, that makes the difference. According to this view of the natural world and human beings, each of us has the power to embrace good or evil and change our behaviour. Such a mindset becomes vital, when one is working with minors involved with the justice system, or any young attendees come to that.

O mickle is the powerful grace that lies
 In plants, herbs, stones, and their true qualities;
 for naught so vile, that on the earth doth live,
 But to the earth some special good doth give;
 Nor ought so good but, strained from that fair use,
 Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse.
 Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied,
 And vice sometimes by action dignified.

Enter Romeo

Within the infant rind of this weak flower
 poison hath residence and medicine power;
 for this, being smelt, with that part cheers each part,
 being tasted, stays all senses with the heart.
 Two such opposed kings encamp them still

in man as well as herbs, grace and rude will.
 And where the worser is predominant,
 Full soon the canker death eats up that plant.
 (2.2.15-30)

Shakespeare's Young Men in *Romeo and Juliet*

In around 1595 when Shakespeare penned *Romeo and Juliet*, he was writing for an exclusively male company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. As indeed was true of his entire career, given the strict laws, prohibiting women from working in theatre, he never had the opportunity to write for women. Notwithstanding, he created several strong female roles, such as Desdemona, Portia, Katherine, Rosalind, Cleopatra, etc. *Romeo and Juliet* is no exception: Juliet and the Nurse are two rounded female characters, while the respective mothers of Romeo and Juliet are sketchily drawn. Still, by and large, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare's focus is on the male characters and especially the young men.¹ The group of young men, in love and out of love, by turn, angry, lustful, remorseful and depressed, desperately wanting to live their lives, but sometimes meeting an early death, includes very different masculinities. Thanks to an exploration of the young men's roles in the tragedy, the young men at the Beccaria had a chance to familiarise themselves with very different male roles from their real-life selves and experiences. Shakespeare pens, moreover, young male servants as well as upper class youths. The ongoing feud between the Capulets and Montagues impacts on the behaviour of all the characters in the play, but especially the acts of violence and aggression and contrasting peace-making affect the young men's lives. As Coppelia Kahn says, "I shall argue that the feud in a realistic social sense is the primary tragic force in the play – not the feud as agent of fate, but the feud as an extreme and peculiar expression of patriarchal society, which Shakespeare shows to be tragically self-destructive.

1 Since the 1990 many critics have explored masculinities in Shakespeare. Important works include: R. Headlman Welles, *Shakespeare on Masculinity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000; B. Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000; J. Feather and C. E. Thomas, *Violent Masculinities, Male Aggression in Early Modern Texts and Culture*, New York, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013.

The feud is the deadly *rite de passage* that promotes masculinity at the price of life.”²

The tragedy begins with what Robert Appelbaum defines as “(...) its opening and recurring spectacle of masculine aggression.”³ The Capulet servants, Sampson and Gregory, set the tone of violence and aggression that intermittently surfaces in the tragedy. The language of this streetwise pair is brimming with bawdy innuendoes, such as Sampson’s “I strike quickly being moved,” reflecting his youthful longing for violence and his lusting for sex. Especially Sampson, whose speaking name, alludes to the biblical Sampson and Goliath, is itching for a fight with members of the enemy clan. In a drama class, which Giuseppe Scutellà led in the “blue room” at the Beccaria, the young men in prison showed that they could convincingly play these exuberant, lower-class characters, whose aggression seethes beneath the witty banter. Here are characters, close to the experience of young men in prison, so they immediately understood and were able to express the servants’ lewd gestures, through their body language. Sampson cries: “I will bite my thumb at them, which is disgrace to them if they bear it,” signalling to the Montague servants his eagerness to rile them.

Instead, some of the young men’s roles presented the actors with a far greater challenge. Romeo, Benvolio, Mercutio and Tybalt belong to well-to-do, upper-class families in late 16th century Verona, a very different background from their own. We did not include Paris in the rewrite since he emerges as a rather flat, stereotypical character.

Romeo, at the centre of our rewrite, is a complex figure, whose stylised, poetic language, verging on the flowery and artificial in the early scenes of Shakespeare’s play, tests an actor’s ability to deliver blank verse. When Romeo declares his love for Rosaline, he seems to be in love not so much with the girl, but with his ability to pen and recite this artificial Petrarchan poetry to impress Benvolio: “Love is a smoke made with the fumes of sighs\being purged a fire sparkling in lovers’ eyes.” As Appelbaum reminds us, “Petrarchanism provides Romeo with a strategy for performing a gender role that both insists on gender difference and allows him to remain aloof from the psychic requirement of thrusting and standing against another.”⁴

2 C. Kahn, *Man’s Estate*, California, University of California Press, California, 1981, p. 84.

3 R. Appelbaum, “Standing to the Wall,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 48, 1997, pp. 251-72.

4 Appelbaum, *Standing to the Wall* cit., p. 265.

Interestingly, Romeo's language and his capacity to love and to empathise evolve during the play, presenting an excellent example of positive change for the workshop attendees. The moment Romeo sets eyes on Juliet, he undergoes a sea-change. Having challenged Romeo's lack of spontaneity when he kisses her for the first time ("You kiss by the book"), Juliet wastes no time in asking him to forget his bachelor life and marry her. Instead of dreaming of Rosaline, who never appears onstage, in the presence of the real-life Juliet, Romeo's language and the metaphors he deploys grow more down to earth:

See how she leans her cheek upon her hand!
Oh that I were a glove 'pon that hand
That I might touch that cheek!"
(2.1.66)

Romeo's passion for Juliet, moreover, persuades him to declare his willingness to give up his very identity by taking another name:

Call me but love and I'll be new baptised.
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.
(2.1.93-4)

Just before he kills Tybalt, Romeo seems to plumb and understand the very depth of civil strife:

This day's black fate on more strife doth depend;
this but begins the woe others must end.
(3.1.119-20)

After murdering Tybalt, Romeo breaks down during his meeting with Friar Lawrence who berates him for his tears and his thoughts of suicide:

Art thou a man? Thy form cries out thou art.
Thy tears are womanish; thy wild acts denote
The unreasonable fury of a beast.
Unseemly woman in a seeming man,
and ill-beseeming beast in seeming both,
thy hast amazed me.
(3.3.108-14)

The Friar gives voice to the commonplace idea that tears and shows of weakness are totally unacceptable in a man, who was expected to be both morally and physically strong. Instead, Romeo looks as if he is made of wax:

Thy noble shape is but a form of wax
digressing from the valour of a man;
(3.3.125-26)

As was mentioned earlier, the workshop participants gave voice to the feelings of our modern-day Romeo in newly written scenes. In our retelling, Romeo is locked in a cell and later tried for Tybalt's murder. For anybody who has committed a murder, or who has physically harmed another person, Romeo's new trajectory is not unfamiliar. In a sequence of ever-shifting moods, the young man expresses remorse, suffering, anger, as he reflects on his crime and the consequences.

Scene 5 of the retelling.

ROMEO:

Romeo... couldn't I have had another name? What's in a name? What's a Montague? It's not hand, foot, arm, face. Perhaps this is all a dream and not really happening. What did I do? Fuck, what have I done? I couldn't ditch Mercutio. No! He would have done the same for me. But now I'm like them. I'm a murderer.

(my translation)

To make Romeo's trial as accurate and authentic as possible, we researched Youth Justice in Italy and explored questions of gang violence, murder, knife crime, in Shakespeare's day and in the present. To support us, we called in a criminologist and a lawyer, both specialised in Youth Justice. It was soon apparent that law and criminality were topics that the workshop participants, and particularly the young people in prison, were keen to learn about. For the trial scene, which turned out to be very dramatic and full of suspense, the writers, some of whom were studying law, skilfully exploited the information they had gleaned from the specialists. In the following example, the Defence Lawyer cites the Italian law that gives a young person,

guilty of murder, a chance to pay for what they have done, without a custodial sentence:

Scene 2.

ROMEO'S DEFENCE LAWYER:

Your Honour, we are not here to claim the innocence of our client, nor to say he was unaware of the facts. The Prosecutor has fully demonstrated Romeo's involvement in the crime. I repeat, we have not come here to say there is no evidence, nor to plead for my client's release. Instead, we ask that the trial should be suspended, with a probation order, according to article 287 D.P.R. 448/1988.

Benvolio can be considered a positive role model for the workshop attendees. In Italian, his name means "a well-wisher" or somebody who is affectionate, and, like the Prince of Verona, he is bent on keeping the peace between the opposing factions. He expresses this intention the minute the Montagues put in an appearance, through two imperatives: "Part fools. Put up your swords" (1.1). He is down-to-earth and offers Romeo some sound advice: he should look for another girlfriend if Rosaline wants nothing more to do with him: "Tut, man, one fire burns out another's burning\ one pain is lessened by another's anguish." (1.1.60) Benvolio, like Mercutio and Tybalt, is a witness at Romeo's trial. As in Shakespeare's tragedy, he is articulate and, in our retelling, he recounts the events which led up to the murders of Mercutio and Tybalt. Moreover, he details these events, from the point of view of a Montague, cleverly tailoring his statement in favour of Romeo and Mercutio.

Scene 8

BENVOLIO:

We were all drunk and high.

We left Juliet's house, looking for a *paninaro*.

Tybalt began rubbing Romeo up the wrong way.

How? He eyeballed him.

Mercutio was high.

When he's high, it's like nothing can stop him.

He was out of control.

But leave off. Leave off, I shouted.

I didn't do anything ...shit.

Mercutio was off his head.

Romeo stepped between the two.
 He tried to stop them.
 It was an accident ... shit.
 Can I go now?
(Calmer and almost to himself)
 Tybalt killed Mercutio. He threw himself on Romeo.
 Romeo acted in self-defence. Tybalt died.
 He'd been looking for it. ...shit.
 Can I have a smoke?
 (my translation)

Like Benvolio, Mercutio has a speaking name; he is “mercurial,” witty, intelligent, effervescent, constantly changing. His name alludes to Mercury, the messenger of the gods, a trickster, known for his eloquence and magical use words. Mercutio actually purports to be a magician, with a remarkable imagination. He loves punning about sex and girls as sexual objects, a mindset which stands in sharp contrast to Romeo’s overtly romantic vision of love:

If love be blind, love cannot hit the mark.
 Now will he sit under a medlar tree
 And wish his mistress were that kind of fruit
 As maids call medlars when they laugh alone.
 O Romeo, that she were, O that she were
 An open-arse, or thou a popp’rin’ pear.
 (2.1.34-9)

This poet, wordsmith and songwriter immediately sparked the group’s creativity. Many of the inmates write songs and raps, often expressing their difficult experiences in prison, so for them Mercutio was a particularly attractive figure. Mercutio is well capable of analysing the dynamics that can make petty quarrels escalate into terrible crimes. Such dynamics are very familiar to young men, who may have spent their youth engaged in gang warfare. In the following scene Mercutio seeks to rile Benvolio by accusing him of not being the peacekeeper he claims to be:

Thou? Why, thou will quarrel with a man that hath a hair more or a hair less in his beard than thou hast. Thou will quarrel with a man for cracking nuts, having no other reason but because thou hast hazel eyes.
 (3.1.17-9)

The reasons, which Mercutio claims make Benvolio quarrel, become gradually more absurd – from somebody waking up his dog, lying in the sun, to a tailor who dares to wear a new doublet before Easter. In our retelling, Mercutio plays a very different role. In the Prologue, set in a changing room, he reveals how at Juliet’s party he spent most of the time upstairs, making love to one of the girls. He is boisterous and loud, accusing Benvolio of being effeminate and not enjoying sex. When Tybalt enters, like Benvolio, he comes in for some taunting, but this time the argument escalates into a fight.

Tybalt, Prince of Cats, is the most aggressive and violent of the young men, embodying a recurring trait of the masculine gender in Renaissance England. Jennifer Feather puts it well, “Men’s capacity to imagine, control and enact violence has come to define normative masculinity in both Western and global contexts.”⁵ Among the group of young men in Verona, Tybalt is the one most inclined to stir up the feud between Capulets and Montagues. He mocks and rejects Benvolio’s pleas for peace, in the following words, “What, are thou drawn among these heartless hinds? \ Turn thee Benvolio, look upon thy death” (1.1.62-3). A little later he mounts an even more threatening attack on this self-appointed peacekeeper, extending his threats to the entire Montague clan, “What, drawn and talk of peace? I hate the word \ as I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee” (1.1.65-6). Tybalt’s hate of the Montagues surfaces again at the Capulets’ party, where he attempts to convince Juliet’s father to throw Romeo out. When he doesn’t succeed, on meeting Romeo again, he insults him, “Romeo, the love I bear thee, can afford \ No better term than this: thou art a villain” (3.1.61-2). Notwithstanding Romeo’s attempts to appease Tybalt, the latter refuses to listen to reason and attacks Mercutio, who draws his sword. Like Mercutio, Tybalt’s role is drastically reduced in our retelling, and he, like Mercutio, returns as a ghost to give evidence at Romeo’s trial, admitting that he murdered Mercutio.

5 J. Feather, C.C. Thomas, *Violent Masculinities, cit.*, p. 3.

Outcome of the Workshop

Through the study of the young male characters in *Romeo and Juliet*, the attendees gained an insight into a wide spectrum of masculinities, which doubtless helped them to contribute to our new playscript. As was seen, some of the characters in Shakespeare's tragedy were rewritten and became part of the new script. It should also be mentioned that during the workshop the young men learnt to work in small groups and engage in a lively exchange with their peers. They began to show more respect for difference and enjoyed developing friendships with both genders. The university students developed similar skills and many of them reconsidered the stereotypes they may have had about prison and prisoners prior to the workshop. We encouraged students to keep a logbook and some of their reflections can be found there.

