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Thomas H. Blackburn
Swarthmore College

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Teaching *Romeo and Juliet* with *Troilus and Cressida* and *Antony and Cleopatra*

Thomas H. Blackburn

The pedagogical setting in which I assign the trio of *Romeo and Juliet* (*Rom.*) *Troilus and Cressida* (*Tro.*), and *Antony and Cleopatra* (*Ant.*) uniquely enables so demanding an intertextual exercise. This group of plays comes roughly at the midpoint of the fourteen meetings of an honors seminar in Shakespeare in which we read twenty-three plays of the canon. The ten or fewer students in the seminar meet with me for one weekly session lasting up to five hours. Since the seminar counts for half of each student's class load for the semester, it becomes reasonable for me to assign the three plays over two weeks and require a five- or six-page essay as well. In the first meeting on the plays, students read aloud scenes they have selected to open up issues that interested them in their first reading of the plays. The students' essays, made available through the campus computer network before the second session, provide the focus for discussion in that session. Though the experience would not be so concentrated, one could work with these plays through three or four weeks of class sessions or read *Romeo and Juliet* in conjunction with only one of the other two plays.

When we come to this group of plays, my seminar students have already worked intertextually with plays from different points in Shakespeare's career in a one-week assignment that paired *The Taming of the Shrew* with *Measure for Measure*. They will also have covered *Love's Labours Lost*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Much Ado about Nothing*. This earlier work in comedy provides students with contexts for viewing the blocking action of Old Capulet as he demands that Juliet marry Paris, for recognizing the Petrarchan excesses of some of Romeo's love discourse, and for seeing how his obligations to his young Montague kinsman and to friends such as Mercutio lead to conflicts with his maturing love for Juliet.

In addition to choosing and preparing scenes for the first session on the plays, the students receive an assignment I have devised to ground their reading in particular attention to the texts. The first part of the assignment asks students to go through the plays and list the adjectives, images, and other descriptive terms or actions defining each of the sides in the central oppositions in the plays: Montague and Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*, Greek and Trojan in *Troilus and Cressida*, and Rome and Egypt in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Working from those lists and from the close reading of the plays necessary to formulate them, students then draft a conclusion about the nature, scope, and origins of each opposition. Through this part of the assignment the students also become aware of the extent to which scenes associated with each side of the opposition alternate to constitute a distinctive structural feature of the plays.

The second part of the exercise turns attention to the pairs of lovers by asking the students to pay close attention to the language in a series of comparable

scenes in which the nature and basis of the evolving love relationships may be discovered. The list of scenes to be examined usually includes three in which the man describes his beloved and reveals something of the nature of his feelings (*Rom.* 1.5.46–55; *Tro.* 1.1.49–64; *Ant.* 1.1.35–42, 50–57); three in which the woman reflects on the man's strategies of wooing (*Rom.* 2.2.85–106; *Tro.* 1.2.284–97; *Ant.* 4.13.1–10); three in which the lovers face the dawn after a night together (*Rom.* 3.5.1–64; *Tro.* 4.2; *Ant.* 4.4); and three in which the lovers declare their response to the certainty that they shall not live happily ever after (Romeo and Juliet and Antony and Cleopatra on their resolve to commit suicide, Troilus and Cressida on revenge or resignation to change). The essay assignment for the second week asks the students to use the evidence and definitions they have gathered to address issues such as the relation of the lovers' society to the nature of their love, the extent to which the conditions of the society determine the fate of the lovers, and the sense in which the fate of each pair is or is not tragic.

Summarizing the discoveries to which this assignment has led in the course of several seminars may suggest the potential of this intertextual reading to illuminate aspects of the earliest play of the trio. Study of the conflict between Capulet and Montague in *Romeo and Juliet* reveals, for example, that the feud is never more fully defined than as an "ancient grudge" (prologue 3) giving rise to "civil brawls, bred of an airy word" (1.1.89).¹ No cause for the families' rooted hatred of each other is adduced, and, until Tybalt slays Mercutio and Romeo kills Tybalt in revenge, no substantial reason appears for the continuance of the quarrel. The feud threatens the peace of Verona and is criticized by the other citizens, who cry "Down with the Capulets! Down with the Montagues!" (1.1.74) in a manner that foreshadows Mercutio's dying curse, "A plague o' both your houses!" (3.1.98–99, 105). But the feud has no influence beyond Verona's city walls. It is merely a matter of "mad blood" (3.1.5), stirred by a difference that seems no more than "What's in a name" (2.2.44). Set against the epic events of the Trojan war announced in the prologue to *Troilus and Cressida* or against the multifaceted political and cultural differences between Egypt and Rome in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the real—if deadly—meaninglessness and fundamental simplicity of the quarrel between the Capulets and Montagues are highlighted. Greek and Trojan in *Troilus and Cressida* are not merely family names but opposing states; the strife between them has its origin and explicit cause in "[t]he ravished Helen, Menelaus' queen, / With [whom] the wanton Paris sleeps" (prologue 9–10). No local civil brawl, the war has lasted seven weary years, seems no nearer resolution than when it began, and, as Hector notes, has literally decimated the Trojan forces (2.2.19).

The prize at stake in the contests between Mark Antony, Octavius Caesar, and Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* is discovered to be nothing less than empire. The opposition arises in part from the politics of the failed triumvirate of Caesar, Antony, and Ptolemy, which was destabilized by Caesar's drive for singular hegemony. The strife, however, is not only a political rivalry between

two Romans but also a clash of cultures between Rome and Egypt. Rome is cold, its frigidity mirrored in Octavia's "holy, cold and still conversation" (2.6.124–25); Egypt is hot, the land of Cleopatra, "with Phoebus' amorous pinches black" (1.5.29). Rome is duty and the masculine culture of the warrior who would "drink / The stale of horses and the gilded puddle / Which beasts would cough at" (1.5.62–64); Egypt is the site of pleasure where Antony "fishes, drinks, and wastes / The lamps of night in revel" (1.4.4–5) and where a "triple pillar of the world" (1.1.12) may, from the Roman point of view, become "the bellows and the fan / to cool a gipsy's lust" (1.1.9–10) and be "transformed / Into a strumpet's fool" (1.1.12–13).

Students discover in analyzing these oppositions that all three male protagonists must deal with the threat of effemination as they try to negotiate between their love and the demands of the masculine cultures that perpetuate the conflicts. Romeo is taunted by Mercutio in 2.4 for having abandoned the bawdy wit of his adolescent fellows in favor of "driveling love" (2.4.90), and, when Romeo acknowledges that Mercutio has got his "mortal hurt / In my behalf" (3.1.109–10), he laments that Juliet's beauty "hath made me effeminate, / And in my temper softened valor's steel" (3.1.113–14). Choosing to honor the masculine obligations defined by the feud fatally compromises Romeo's chances of living happily ever after with Juliet.

Triolus early in the play acknowledges that his desire for Cressida has made him "weaker than a woman's tear" (1.1.9) and, when faced with the necessity of turning Cressida over to the Greeks in exchange for Antenor, accepts the loss rather than forfeit his status among his warrior brethren (4.4). Antony, when he is in his own Roman mood, recognizes that his passion for Cleopatra has deprived him of the masculine warrior prowess that made him great. As he complains to Cleopatra after he has followed her fleeing ships in the first battle against Caesar,

Now I must
 To the young man send humble treaties, dodge
 And palter in the shifts of lowness, who
 With half the bulk of the world played as I pleased,
 Making and marring fortunes. You did know
 How much you were my conqueror, and that
 My sword, made weak by my affection, would
 Obey it on all cause. (3.11.60–67)

Finding similarities among the lovers' choices may occasion students to reflect on the pervasive conflict in Shakespeare's plays between patriarchal ideologies of honor, which call for sacrifice of life and reduce women to objects of exchange, and the life-affirming potential of heterosexual love. Recognizing the stakes involved in the lovers' choices may lead to the further recognition that Romeo's choice is much closer to the comic dilemmas faced by characters like

Valentine or Benedict than it is to the choices faced by Antony and Troilus—though its outcome is far from comic.

Close reading of the assigned scenes both for themselves and in the context of the plays' central oppositions may lead finally to an understanding of the different modes of loving that the plays represent. To take just one example from the four sets of passages I assign for analysis, the language of the speeches in which each of the men first describes the object of his love establishes a mode that students may trace into the other scenes.

Romeo's first glimpse of Juliet calls forth the hyperbolic fervor of his sudden passion, a passion springing, like the family feud, from no cause but itself:

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
 It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
 As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear—
 Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!
 So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows
 As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows. (1.5.45–50)

Embedded in the praise is the dramatic irony that Juliet's beauty will indeed turn out to be "for earth too dear" and will eventually be preserved from otherwise inevitable corruption only in the timeless gold of her funeral monument.

When in a speech to Pandarus Troilus first reveals to the reader his passion for Cressida, the contrast between Troilus's words and Romeo's innocent hyperboles is striking. Troilus describes himself as "mad / In Cressid's love" (1.1.53–54). The vestiges of Romeo's Petrarchan comparatives in Troilus's speech are surrounded by images of love as disease or wound:

Thou answer'st she is fair;
 Pour'st in the open ulcer of my heart
 Her eyes, her hair, her cheek, her gait, her voice;
 Handlest in thy discourse—O!—that her hand,
 In whose comparison all whites are ink
 Writing in their own reproach, to whose soft seizure
 The cygnet's down is harsh, and spirit of sense
 Hard as the palm of plowman. This thou tell'st me,
 As true thou tell'st me, when I say I love her;
 But, saying thus, instead of oil and balm
 Thou lay'st in every gash that love hath given me
 The knife that made it. (1.1.54–65)

The language here is of a piece with the perfervid anticipation Troilus recounts as he awaits the consummation of his passion. He is "giddy" (3.2.17), he fears "swooning destruction" (3.2.22), and his "heart beats thicker than a feverous pulse" (3.2.35). In response to Paris's genealogy of love—"hot blood begets hot

thoughts, and hot thoughts beget hot deeds, and hot deeds is love" (3.1.129–30)—Pandarus proposes that love is a "generation of vipers" (3.1.133). In this play, because the adulterous Helen is at its center, love is not "too rich [. . .] for earth." Based only on desire that depends on presence and can never be satiated, the relationship between Troilus and Cressida cannot survive change or achieve even a posthumous transcendence. Just as the honor of battle heroes is corrupted by Ulysses's petty schemings and Hector's overriding of the "moral laws / Of nature and of nations" (2.2.184–85), love is tainted by futile lust in an overall vision that reduces epic matter to a bitter and nihilistic satire on human folly.

The first description of Cleopatra voiced by Antony emphasizes not her transcendent beauty or his feverous desire but her changefulness, what Enobarbus later calls her "infinite variety," which "custom" cannot "stale" (2.2.245–46). Diverting Cleopatra from her insistence that he give audience to the Roman ambassadors who will eventually call him back to confront Caesar, Antony replies:

Fie, wrangling Queen!
Whom everything becomes—to chide, to laugh,
To weep; whose every passion fully strives
To make itself in thee, fair and admired! (1.1.50–53).

For the "love of Love and her soft hours" (1.1.46), Antony is content to deny the claims of empire. Antony consciously measures the strength of his love against what that love may cost him; even though his experience tells him that his beloved is "cunning past man's thought" (1.2.153), he will wish that "Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch / Of the ranged empire fall!" (1.1.35–36). The very changefulness that Romeo and Juliet and, with different anxieties, Troilus and Cressida must vow to resist is the essence of Cleopatra's power to transcend the inevitable death of desire in desire's fulfillment. Romeo and Juliet escape the diminution of love by dying early; Troilus and Cressida enjoy no such release. In lines that notably echo Antony's earlier formulation, Enobarbus defines the queen's power over the satiety that makes Cressida so fearful of submitting to Troilus and makes Juliet regret for a moment her frankness to Romeo in the balcony scene:

Other women cloy
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies, for vilest things
Become themselves in her, that the holy priests
Bless her when she is riggish. (2.2.246–50)

For Antony and Cleopatra, long experienced in love and sensuality, love is neither a matter of simple absolutes, as it is for Romeo and Juliet, nor a fantasy of

constancy based on ephemeral passion, as it is for Troilus and Cressida. Antony and Cleopatra do not come to a swift suicidal end, dying on a single kiss, as do Romeo and Juliet. Nor are they left to linger in unheroic disillusion, as are Troilus and Cressida. Their protracted and complicated suicides reflect the ambiguities of role and relationship that both doom and glorify the choices they make for themselves and for each other. The Roman sword with which Antony fails to end life briefly and the “pretty worm of Nilus” (5.2.243), which is Cleopatra’s still erotic but “easy [way] to die” (5.2.356), lack the romantic simplicity of the poison and dagger in *Romeo and Juliet*. The grand scale of the older lovers’ passion and sacrifice, however, is summed in Cleopatra’s lament that with Antony’s passing,

withered is the garland of the war;
The soldier’s pole is fall’n! Young boys and girls
Are level now with men. The odds is gone,
And there is nothing left remarkable
Beneath the visiting moon. (4.15.65–69)

Students may finish this comparative study with the conclusion that *Romeo and Juliet* either is or is not more tragic than *Antony and Cleopatra* or *Troilus and Cressida*. The naive idealism of the young lovers set against the meaninglessness of the feud that envelops them evokes deep sympathy in some students. Others see in Romeo and Juliet’s naïveté and helplessness a lack of self-knowledge and of conscious choice that renders the young lovers’ suicides less tragic than Antony and Cleopatra’s complex sacrifice in the name of love. The world of *Troilus and Cressida* is discovered to be tragic only in the sense that there is no escape from the taint of excessive and adulterous passion or from the futile folly of a war fought for a worthless prize. Reading these ampersand plays together, students find that *Romeo and Juliet* emerges as a romantic tragedy; *Troilus and Cressida*, as a love story for cynics; and *Antony and Cleopatra*, as a tragic romance, a *Romeo and Juliet* for grown-ups.

NOTE

¹ Citations in this essay are from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, edited by David Bevington.