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CRITICAL HISTORY

TRADITIONAL CRITICISM

Eighteenth-century criticism of Shakespeare was concerned chiefly with the structure of his plays and the extent to which this did, or did not, conform to the model of Classical drama, though the early eighteenth-century poet Alexander Pope, who edited Shakespeare's works, pointedly remarked that 'To judge ... of Shakespeare by Aristotle's rules, is like trying a man by the Laws of one Country, who acted under those of another'. It was in reaction to the judgmental, and often censorious, tenor of much eighteenth-century criticism that the poets and critics of the Romantic period came to champion Shakespeare's genius, imagination and passion as far more important than matters of plot and structure. These qualities were discerned in Shakespeare's poetry, and in the authenticity this gave to the feelings of his characters. For the Romantic critic and poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge they were especially in evidence in *Romeo and Juliet*. In lectures on the play he commended the variety of its language, the individuality of its characters and the power of its depiction of passionate feeling.

This line in criticism culminated in A. C. Bradley's immensely influential *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), which treated Shakespeare's characters not as parts of a dramatic design but as living persons, each with a personal history and a fully developed psychology which could be analysed. He interpreted the action of the tragedies (though his book did not include a chapter on *Romeo and Juliet*) in terms of the personality and choices of their tragic heroes. This approach was famously mocked in an essay entitled 'How many children had Lady Macbeth?' by L. C. Knights (1933).

DECONSTRUCTION AND HISTORICISM

Following Knights, recent criticism has lost interest in characterisation. Contemporary studies are concerned much more, first, with the complexity of texts and the way that their apparent meanings are contradicted and problematised. This deconstructive

approach seeks to bring out the tensions within texts and to challenge the claim that texts have a single meaning, which is what their authors intended them to mean. It is exemplified in the essays collected in John Drakakis's aptly entitled *Alternative Shakespeares* (1985).

Secondly, critics have been interested in the ways texts are shaped not by their author's intentions but by the societies and cultures which produced them, and in the extent to which they either reinforce, or work against, the political and social power systems of their time. New historicists tend to argue that the *status quo* is confirmed by textual representations of power while cultural materialists (often of a Marxist persuasion) such as Jonathan Dollimore look out for passages of resistance to institutional authority. Both are interested in how far the subversive tendencies of texts are contained. Such an approach would seek to establish how far the re-establishment of traditional order at the end of *Romeo and Juliet* closes down the challenge to that order posed by the actions of the lovers.

The reading offered in the Critical Approaches in these Notes has explored the ways in which the love of Romeo and Juliet is vindicated. However, approaches of a deconstructive and historicist cast might challenge that, on the grounds of what the play does not mention and what the audience might be expected to have brought to it. An uncomfortable silence is maintained about one conspicuous feature of the plot, namely, the suicide of Romeo and Juliet. The silence is uncomfortable because everyone in the Elizabethan audience would have known that suicide is a mortal sin, that there could be no burial in consecrated ground for suicides and that they had lost all hope of salvation. The play is silent on this because, of course, to introduce the notion that Romeo and Juliet are damned would run entirely against its celebration of their love. In fact, however, its silence only alerts us to the omission, for the fact would have been so glaringly obvious as to be inescapable. It is all but inconceivable that, at the end of the play, neither the Friar nor the Prince should mention it. This tension between the play's text and its cultural context problematises it in other ways: Romeo and Juliet are passionate lovers, utterly immoderate in their obsession with each other, quite incapable of compromise (as the Friar reminds us). It is this, as much as any external force, which



CHECK THE BOOK

For a radical reading of *Romeo and Juliet* as an attack on the way human relations are constrained by social and sexual stereotypes and structures of power, see Kiernan Ryan's study entitled, simply, *Shakespeare*.

CONTEXT

Since the eighteenth century the word 'Romeo' has been used in English to refer to any male lover or seducer of women.

World events

1492 Columbus sails to America

1534 Henry VIII breaks with Rome and declares himself head of the Church of England

1556 Archbishop Cranmer burnt at the stake

1558 Elizabeth I accedes to throne

Shakespeare's life

1564 (26 April) William Shakespeare baptised, Stratford-upon-Avon (birth traditionally dated 23 April, St George's Day)

Literature and the arts

1374 Death of Petrarch, most popular poet of the Italian Renaissance

1476 Masuccio Salernitano writes original tale of Romeo and Juliet

1487 Matteomaria Boiardo, *Orlando Innamorato*, the love story of Orlando and Angelica

1513 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

1528 Castiglione, *Book of the Courtier*

1532 Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso* continues Boiardo's love story

1562 Arthur Brooke, *The Tragical History of Romeo and Juliet*. Birth of Lope de Vega, Spanish dramatist

1567 William Painter, 'The goodly Historie of the true and constant love between Rhomeo and Julietta'

World events

1568 Mary Queen of Scots taken prisoner by Elizabeth I

1570 Elizabeth I excommunicated by Pope Pius V

1571 The Battle of Lepanto

1577 Francis Drake sets out on round the world voyage

1582 Outbreak of the Plague in London

1584 Raleigh's sailors land in Virginia

1587 Execution of Mary Queen of Scots after implication in plot to murder Elizabeth I

1588 The Spanish Armada defeated

1589 Accession of Henri IV to French throne

Shakespeare's life

1582 He marries Anne Hathaway

1583 His daughter, Susanna, born

1585 His twins, Hamnet and Judith, born

late 1580s – early 90s He probably writes *Henry VI (Parts I, II, III)* and *Richard III*

Literature and the arts

1576 James Burbage builds the first theatre in England, at Shoreditch

1579 Edmund Spenser, *The Shepheardes Calender*

1580 (c.) Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apologie for Poetrie*

1584 John Lyly's *Alexander, Campaspe and Diogenes*

1587 Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great*

1588-9 Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*

1590 Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene (Books I-III)*

1591 Sir John Harington translates *Orlando Furioso* into English