Romeo And Juliet 11 Essay, Research Paper

Why Romeo and Juliet was so popular in Shakespeare s time and why even

today it is still so popular?

William Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564 in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon, England to Mary Arden and John Shakespeare. He was the third of eight children. He went to a local grammar school, where his studies included Latin and Greek (Debnam).

At the age of eighteen he married Anne Hathaway who was eight years older than he. Their marriage was hurried because Anne was already pregnant (The Tragedies, 16). Shakespeare was the father of three children, two daughters and one son, Hamnet. At this time, Shakespeare was twenty-one, and the way he supported his family is unknown. In August of 1596, Hamnet died at the age of eleven (Shakespeare s History).

Stories say that Shakespeare began his career by holding horses outside the theaters. More reliable information indicates that he acted in plays, many of his own. From acting Shakespeare progressed to writing plays both for the theater and for court performances (The Tragedies, 17).

Shakespeare didn t attend college, so in order to broaden his education, he studied the ways of a gentleman and read widely. He looked to Cambridge-educated playwright Christopher Marlowe, as a mentor. Marlowe was the same age as Shakespeare, but who preceded him in skillfully combining drama with poetry. In many plays throughout his career, Shakespeare paid tribute to Marlowe, though ultimately he eclipsed Marlowe as a dramatist (The Tragedies, 17).

Shakespeare is the greatest playwright the world has ever known. The thirty-seven plays he wrote more than 400 years ago are the most popular on Earth. They are performed more often than those of any other playwright. He also wrote sonnets, a kind of poem. Writing sonnets was thought to be much more important than writing plays in Shakespeare s day (Debnam).

By the time Shakespeare turned thirty years old, he was an established actor and playwright in London. At the age of thirty-three, he had not only written the early poems and the early plays, but in the last three or four years half-a-dozen masterpieces: “A Midsummer Night s Dream,” “Romeo and Juliet,” Richard II.,” “King John,” “The Merchant of Venice,” “The Two Parts of Henry IV” (Shakespeare The Man, 382). When he was thirty-five, Shakespeare was a member of the syndicate responsible for building the first Globe theater, in Southwark, in 1599 (General Into). From then on, Shakespeare was completely involved in the theater: He wrote for the company, acted in the plays, shared in the profits, and eventually became one of the owners of the Globe theater (The Tragedies, 19). This famous theater made him wealthy, not his plays as some might believe, which he did not make much money from (Debnam).

In 1612, Shakespeare divided his time between Stratford and London. On March 25, 1616, while he was in fine health, Shakespeare made a will. A month later, after a trip to London, he suddenly became ill and died on his birthday, at the age of fifty-two. As he lay dying, the chapel bell knelled for the passing of his soul, for the man for whom love was the center of the universe and the central subject of his many works (The Tragedies, 27).

Romeo and Juliet, which was Shakespeare s first tragedy, was first printed in 1597. Upon this first printing it is described as An excellent conceited tragedy that had been often (with great applause) played publicly . At this time the play was already well known, in Italian, French, and English. Shakespeare owes most to Arthur Brooke s long poem The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet (1592) (The Complete Works, 335). He also may have looked and studied other versions of the play before writing his own version of Romeo and Juliet.

Shakespeare s Romeo and Juliet is among the most widely recognizable and most often read and studied Western literary classic. A major reason for the play s continuing appeal is that its characters explore and express a wide range of human emotions and experiences, especially those that deal with young love (R&J, 12). This tragic play is cherished throughout many years because readers wish to have some of the same qualities that both Romeo and Juliet acquire.

Romeo is very brave and cunning. He expresses his lover through his actions by never giving up hope and staying faithful to his wife, whom he has been banished from. Even when he hears the horrible news that his new wife is dead, he rushes to be by her side, despite being banished by the prince of Verona to Mantua. Seeing her lying motionless inside the family tomb makes him lose his strength and will to live. He swiftly pulls out a vile containing poison and drinks it so that he may finally be allowed to spend eternity with Juliet, who is still fast asleep unaware of what is happening to her husband. When she awakens and sees Romeo laying at her side, dead, she loses her strength and will to live and kills herself with his dagger. She does this because she knows love is a force stronger and greater than death; she would rather die and be with Romeo than live and be without him.

There are many qualities of Romeo and Juliet that have kept the reader s appeal fresh. The audience enjoys hearing about true love and how it will someday prevail. People want to be able to relate to the couple s love for each other and repeatedly want to compare it to their own love. Quite often people yearn to have a lifestyle like that of Romeo and Juliet. For this reason, audiences will always continue to read about true love, and although it may be heartbreaking, the reader enjoys hearing about situations they can relate to.

Romeo and Juliet is often compared to other Shakespearean works that were written around the same time period. Some of these works include Richard II, Richard III, and Kind John. Frank Harris does just this in The Man Shakespeare. He explains that:

Romeo and Juliet seems to me to be far more characteristic of the poet s genius than any of these histories; it is not only a finer work of art than any of them, and therefore of higher promise, but in its lyrical sweetness far more truly representative of Shakespeare s youth than any of the earlier comedies or historical plays (127).

Shakespeare expresses love and emotion so vividly in Romeo and Juliet, which makes it so noteworthy and “of a higher promise” than any of his earlier works.

Another critic, H. B. Charlton, only considers Romeo and Juliet to be an “experimental tragedy.” He points out that “somehow or in some respects Romeo and Juliet fails to fulfil the function of tragedy, or rather it gives less of the pleasure peculiar to tragedy than do Shakespeare s greater tragic plays [sic]” (Romeo and Juliet as an Experimental Tragedy, 4). He goes on to suggest that “Shakespeare s Romeo and Juliet has come down to us with a physical feature attached to it which for Shakespearian tragedy is unique” (Romeo and Juliet as an Experimental Tragedy, 14).

Cedric Watts, writer of Twayne s New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare, believes that Shakespeare put too much emphasis the youth of the lovers, tragic miscalculations, and the lacking of inevitability. In his book, Watts illustrates this point with pin point accuracy. He explains that:

It is obviously true that the plot depends on seemingly random occurrences. For example: in Act 1, Capulet entrusts the party invitations to a messenger who is unable to read; the messenger therefore consults a passer-by, who just happens to be Romeo; Romeo thus learns of the festivities, and decides to attend them in order to see Rosaline; and thus he chances to encounter Juliet. In Act 3, Romeo seeks to part the combatants in the street-fight, and the unintended result is that Mercutio, impeded by Romeo s arm, is mortally stabbed by Tybalt. Above all, there is the absurd delay of Friar Laurence s letter to Romeo: absurd not only because the somewhat farcical obtrudes itself at a crucial point but also because the playwright s arrangement of events here seems uncharacteristically maladroit. Laurence entrusts his letter to Friar John ( a new character introduced inelegantly late in the play), and hapless John is trapped for a while in a house at Padua because there has been an outbreak of plague – an outbreak of which there has been no mention previously. The chance event seems rather clumsily contrived. Again, if Friar Laurence had arrived only a few minutes later, and if Juliet had awakened only a minute sooner, the disaster might have been averted. Hence the painful quality of the plotting in Act 5: we think, If only, if only So near and yet so far (40).

This does seem quiet strange that almost every consequential event is disrupted by “tragic miscalculations” and “chance events.” If Shakespeare had not organized his play this way the outcome effect would not have been the same. We would not have gotten the feeling of “If only, if only So near and yet so far.” The whole point of arranging these events in this “inevitable” order is so that the play seems all the more tragic to the audience.

Charles Haines praises Romeo and Juliet in his book Immortals of Literature, William Shakespeare and His Plays. He reminds us of the fact that Shakespeare was a poet, and that he had a poet s knowledge of words and a playwright s understanding of what the audience wants and combined this gave him a sort of sixth sense of combining poetry with drama. Haines declares:

[Romeo and Juliet] contains some of Shakespeare s most beautiful lines. The names of Romeo and Juliet have become symbols all over the world of young love. Although exquisite and moving, Romeo and Juliet is perhaps not among Shakespeare s most profound tragedies. In the prologue to the play, Romeo and Juliet are spoken of as “star-crossed lovers,” which is to say, persons caught in a web of destiny, chance, and accident. Indeed, both Romeo and Juliet die as the result of an accident, largely because a message had miscarried. It is impossible to trace a straight line from the characters of Romeo and Juliet to their premature deaths. Both of them were, perhaps, foolish, reckless, and ill-advised in some of their behavior, but their deaths were as much due to accident as to the workings of their characters (74).

Unlike Watts, Haines does not relate every misfortune to a “chance event,” and he does not feel that is possible. He both praises and slightly criticizes Shakespeare s Romeo and Juliet.

Although there are many qualities the play Romeo and Juliet posses that attract us to it, the one that shines above all the rest is the everlasting love Romeo and Juliet have for one another. They continue to show their love for one another from the first time they meet to the last time they look at the other before committing suicide because they can t imagine living in a world without the other. Their love for each other conquers all other things, even life itself. This, along with many other characteristics that Romeo and Juliet posses are what has kept us drawn to this play and plays like it for 400 years. People will probably never get tired of a story of ever-lasting love, for it is what all people wish to have in their lives. They desire to cast themselves as Romeo and Juliet so they can experience what true love does to the mind, body, and soul.