Reape 1

Brendan Reape

Professor Terry Fairchild

April 22, 2014

Time in Romeo & Juliet

In modern times people have a tendency to think of time as being something like a commodity; it is a fixed thing that can be objectively measured, there is only a certain allotment of it for each person within a day, and most of us would like to buy more of it. However, the way we experience time is much more abstract and sensitive to circumstance than Rolex manufacturers would have you believe. A more realistic interpretation of time is found all throughout William Shakespeare's masterpiece *Romeo & Juliet.* An attempt to place an objective measurement on how much time transpires during the play will land one around a window of four to six days (Tanselle 349). Though this is a short amount of time for all the events of the play to unfold, this is not how the main characters Romeo and Juliet experience the passing of time. When they are kept apart from one another they experience time as an excruciatingly slow drip. When they are together they experience a transcendent timelessness while the world around them rushes by like a roaring river. The extraordinarily short time it takes for the play to transpire makes Romeo and Juliet’s experience of love as being eternal all the more significant, and for the better part of the play these lovers do battle with the constricting forces of society, fate, and time, in an attempt to preserve the purity and boundlessness of their love. When their efforts fail, the lovers take their lives, and in doing so they immortalize their love in the realm beyond the relative, and also in the pages of history.

All the major dramatic moments in *Romeo & Juliet* unfold within a very short window of time due to the rash decision making of the main characters. The play is thought to take place between a total of four to six days which is quite a change from the earlier versions of this story that Shakespeare studied where it takes months for all the events to unfold (Tanselle 349-361). Shakespeare's quickened version of this story accentuates the passionate nature of

Reape 2

the characters and their inability to take more rational or tempered approaches to their situations, no doubt influenced by their very young ages. The first instance where the extremity of the pace of the play becomes apparent is when Romeo and Juliet first meet. When Romeo first sets eyes on Juliet he instantaneously jumps ship from his unrequited romance with Rosaline and exclaims “Did my heart love till now? forswear it, sight! / For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night” (I.v.33-34). Within a matter of minutes these two go from being perfectly good strangers to briefly flirting, then kissing. Even after spending only a few moments in one another’s presence, their extreme and total commitment to one another is sealed. This is revealed when Juliet claims, “if [Romeo] be married. / My grave is like to be my wedding bed,” meaning that she would rather die than marry another (I.v.135-136). Romeo displays similar commitment to Juliet by risking his life to sneak near her balcony later that night. Even Juliet thinks this act to be “too rash, too unadvised, too sudden; / Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be / Ere one can say “It lightens”” (II.ii.90-91). Indeed time shows the story of their love to be similar in nature to lightning; only existing for brief moment as a brilliant flash of light before returning to the heavens. The remainder of the events fall as slow and delicately as a line of dominos slap shotted with hockey stick: Romeo and Juliet marry only one day after meeting, Romeo is banished from Verona for slaying Tybalt the next day, Juliet drinks the Friar’s sleeping potion almost immediately, Romeo drinks the Apothecary's poison within two days of hearing of Juliet’s death and only minutes after seeing Juliet’s body, and Juliet follows in her lover’s footsteps almost immediately after waking. So much excitement is not found within the course of a lifetime for most people, yet these lovers experienced the highest highs and lowest lows within a matter of days. Romeo’s rash decision to end his life as soon as he is the tomb with Juliet is especially unfortunate because had he waited only for a moment he would have discovered a waking Juliet, and the tragedy could

Reape 3

have perhaps been avoided. However, if the characters had not been as passionate or excitable, their romance would hardly be as memorable.

Though the play’s events happen with haste, Romeo and Juliet do not necessarily experience the events from this perspective. When the two lovers are kept apart from one another they perceive the passage of time to be excruciatingly slow. After agreeing to marry the next day, Juliet tells Romeo, “'Tis twenty year till then,” meaning the coming day while she waits to be wed to Romeo will feel as if it were really twenty years (II.ii.169). Impatience is always a sign of time not passing quickly enough for someone, and Juliet’s impatience when news of Romeo is kept from her is seen numerous times. When the Nurse is late returning with Romeo’s instructions for their wedding she says to herself, “Is three long hours, yet she is not come” (II.v.11). These three hours are seemingly long to Juliet who proclaims that “love’s heralds should be thoughts / Which ten times faster glide than the sun’s beams,” demonstrating her desire for the communication of love to be instantaneous and intimate instead of having to be slowly passed about by the hands of time and the outside world (II.v.4-5). When the Nurse arrives Juliet, who is nearly ready to explode, asks for the news, but is further delayed by the Nurse’s cat and mouse game where she replies she is out of breath. Juliet apty responds, “How art thou out of breath, when thou hast breath / To say to me that thou art out of breath?” which demonstrate her wit but also the immediacy in which she craves her response (II.v.31-32). Later when the Friar tells Romeo of the Prince’s edict of banishment, Romeo proclaims, “Ha, banishment! be merciful, say 'death; / For exile hath more terror in his look,” and equates his exile to “purgatory, torture, hell itself” (III.iii.16-23). Romeo can't bare to be without Juliet for the long remainder of his lifetime, a period of longing and suffering that would surely feel longer to him than most anyone else. This is partly why he sees banishment be like the eternal hellfire and death to be the preferable sentence. When Romeo fleas after his final visit with Juliet, she reflects on how she will perceive time during

Reape 4

his absence, “I must hear from thee every day in the hour / For in a minute there are many days, [and] by this count I shall be much in years / Ere I again behold my Romeo” (III.v.44-46). Their decision to take their lives once they believe the other to be dead demonstrates their desire to follow where the other goes, but it may also show that they have considered and expressly decided against the alternative of living. The two factors that would make them reach such a decision would be the amount of pain they would feel from the other’s absence, and the duration of the pain. The later of the two would surely be extreme to one that perceives there are days in a minute of separation.

Romeo and Juliet experience a sense of timelessness when they are together, though time around them continues rushing by. It is said that when two lovers meet that time stands still, and this notably true for the archetypal lovers of this play. Though no references to time are made during their first meeting, there is a bounty of religious imagery used to describe their interaction, such as Romeo’s request Juliet to “let lips do what hands do” and press them together in prayer (I.v.103). Such imagery gives their romance spiritual and transcendent qualities, thus giving it a quality of timelessness as spirit and the transcendent are not bound by time. During the balcony scene Romeo swears his love for Juliet by the moon, to which Juliet replies, “swear not by the moon, th' inconstant moon / That monthly changes in her circle orb / Lest that thy love prove likewise variable” (II.ii.109-111). Juliet desires that Romeo’s love not be constrained by the forces of relativity, but rather be the same as her love for Romeo which is unconstrained and infinite. “My bounty is as boundless as the sea / My love as deep. The more I give to thee / The more I have, for both are infinite” (II.ii.134-136). On the night of their consummation, the lovers try to stave off the forces of time as Romeo must leave by the morning or be put to death. Juliet imagines the call of a bird to be the nightingale and not the lark, unaware of the rapidness of the time around her, saying that “It is not yet near day” (III.v.6). She quickly realizes the error of her judgment and bids Romeo

Reape 5

away. Though the outcome of the play is quite tragic, it helps solidify the timeless quality of the love Romeo and Juliet had for one another in a way they couldn’t while in the confines of relative existence. By taking the plunge together into what Romeo call the “everlasting rest,” for the sake of love, they both eternalize their romance in the minds and hearts of their society, and possibly in a realm beyond earthly life (V.iii.110). Upon learning of the lover’s suicide, the Montague and Capulet families agree to raise statues of the lovers made from “pure gold”, thus immortalizing them in the society in a way that accurately portrays the quality of their love. Gold is the traditional goal of alchemy, but what is more important is what the gold represents, and that is the pure and eternal spirit of life. Romeo and Juliet were certainly the vessels for such a spirit, and history will remember them as such.

*Romeo & Juliet* fantastically displays the extreme malleability that time can have, especially when it encounters the all powerful force of love. It moves at its slowest when love is kept out of one’s reach, and it goes whirling by when lovers are in each other’s embrace. Paradoxically, this time goes by unnoticed by the lovers, as they themselves feel they have transcended the temporal and have been given a glimpse into the eternal.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William, and T. J. B. Spencer. *Romeo and Juliet;*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, …..1967. Print.

Tanselle, G. Thomas. "Time in Romeo and Juliet." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15 (): 349-361. …..Print.