

Shakespeare's Comedy vs. Tragedy

Certain parallels can be drawn between William Shakespeare's plays, "A Midsummer Night's Dream", and "Romeo and Juliet". These parallels concern themes and prototypical Shakespearian character types. Both plays have a distinct pair of 'lovers', Hermia and Lysander, and Romeo and Juliet, respectively. Both plays could have also easily been tragedy or comedy with a few simple changes. A tragic play is a play in which one or more characters is has a moral flaw that leads to his/her downfall. A comedic play has at least one humorous character, and a successful or happy ending. Comparing these two plays is useful to find how Shakespeare uses similar character types in a variety of plays, and the versatility of the themes which he uses.

In "Romeo and Juliet", Juliet is young, "not yet fourteen", and she is beautiful, and Romeo's reaction after he sees her is,

"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 to rich for use, for the earth too dear!"

Juliet is also prudent, "Although I joy in thee, I have no joy in this contract tonight. It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden." She feels that because they have just met, they should abstain from sexual intercourse.

Hermia is also young, and prudent. When Lysander suggests that "One turf shall serve as a pillow for both of us, One heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth," Hermia replies "Nay, good Lysander. For my sake, my dear, Lie further off yet; do not lie so near." Although this couple has known each other for a while (Romeo and Juliet knew each other for one night when the above quote was spoken), Hermia also abstains from even sleeping near Lysander even though she believes he does not have impure intentions.

Romeo's and Juliet's families are feuding. Because of these feuds, their own parents will not allow the lovers to see each other. In the a differnet way Hermia is not allowed to marry Lysander. Hermia's father Egeus says to Theseus, Duke of Athens,

"Full of vexation come I, with complaint
Against my child, my daughter Hermia.
Stand fourth, Demetrius. My noble lord,
This man hath my consent to marry her.
Stand forth, Lysander. And, my gracious Duke,
This man hath bewitched the bosom of my child."

Egeus tells the Duke that his daughter can marry Demetrius, not Lysander. Hermia replies ". . . If I refuse to wed Demetrius," Egeus replies "Either to die the death, or to abjure for ever the society of men." If Hermia does go against her father's wishes, and weds Lysander, she will either be put to death, or be forced to become a nun.

Both pairs of lovers also seek help from another. Juliet and Romeo seek Friar Lawrence, and Lysander and Hermia seek Lysander's aunt, who lives in the woods near Athens. Both sets of youths have the same character type. They are young, their love is prohibited, both women are prudent, and both seek the help of an adult. Yet they have their subtle differences. For example, Lysander, never mentioned a love before Hermia. Romeo loved Rosaline, before he loved Juliet. Hermia's family and Lysander's family were not feuding, whereas the Montagues' and Capulets' feude was central to the plot of the play.

The stories of "Romeo and Juliet" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream" are very different however. "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is a comedy. Oberon, king of the fairies, sends a mischievous imp named, Puck, to play a trick on the queen of the fairies, Titania, and on a pair of Athenian youth. Puck turns Nick Bottom's head into that of an ass (Nick Bottom is the man in the play production within "A Midsummer Night's Dream"; he tried to play every part), and places an herb on Titania that causes her to fall in love with him. This is quite humorous. However, at the end of the play all the couples are back together, with the ones they love. Thus Lysander and Hermia do get married. If Egeus had showed up at the wedding, he could have killed her. Egeus' dominate nature is his 'flaw', and if he would have attended the wedding, and killed his daughter, this play could have been a tragedy.

Likewise, "Romeo and Juliet", could have been a comedy. The first two acts of this play qualifies it as a comedy. In act I, Sampson and Gregory, servants of the Capulets, "talk big about what they'll do the Montagues, make racy comments, and insult each other as often as they insult the Montagues." ("Barron's, 45). In act II, Romeo meets Juliet. All is going well until Tybalt, a Capulet kills Romeo's best friend, Mercutio. Things go continue to go wrong from here, until at the end of the play Romeo, thinking that Juliet is dead (she is in fact alive, she took a drug to fake her death), drinks poison, and when Juliet awakens from the spell of the drug, seeing her dead lover, stabs herself. If the families' pride had not been so great that they would murder one another, or prohibited true love, this play could have been a comedy. This play is a tragedy, not because one character has a flaw, but both families have a flaw- pride.

Prohibited love, romance, controlling families, both plays have it all. With a few simple modifications, "A Midsummer Night's Dream" could have been a tragedy, and "Romeo and Juliet" could have been a comedy. Shakespeare however, uses many of the same character types, young, prudent, rebellious lovers, and controlling family members, in both comedies and tragedies. The end results are character molds, along with theme molds that can be easily translated into almost any plot, in any play.