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Romeo and Juliet on the Screen*

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

1

EXUBERANCE is a difficult thing to portray on the screen—and exuberance is the chief characteristic of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. "There is," says Hazlitt, "the buoyant spirit of youth in every line, in the rapturous intoxication of hope, and in the bitterness of despair."¹

"Read *Romeo and Juliet*," urges Coleridge; "all is youth and spring;—youth with its follies, its virtues, its precipitancies;—spring with its odours; its flowers; and its transiency; it is one and the same feeling that commences, goes through, and ends the play. The old men, the Capulets and Montagues, are not common old men; they have an eagerness, a heartiness, a vehemence, the effects of spring; with Romeo, his change of passion, his sudden marriage, and his rash death, are all the effects of youth;—whilst in Juliet love has all that is tender and melancholy in the nightingale, all that is voluptuous in the rose, with whatever is sweet in the freshness of spring..."²

"But," Coleridge adds (for there is a but, since this is a tragedy), "it ends with a long deep sigh like the last breeze of the Italian evening."³

* Excerpts from this article, very drastically condensed, have been published in *The Sunday Times Magazine*, July 17, 1955, where it attracted some attention and a little controversy. The original article is here published in its entirety.

All this exuberance — this “exquisite ebullience and overflow of youthful life,”⁴—Mr. Castellani has captured in his screen version of *Romeo and Juliet*.

This film is a gorgeous spectacle, pleasing to eye and ear, a feast of sound and color doubtless surpassing the Venetian festival itself at which this film was awarded the grand prize. The photography is superb: the rich architectural details of halls and buildings, of church, cell, and cloister; the realistic street scenes; the splendid costumes; the stately dance; the elaborate religious ritual — all these combine with the sound of bells and birds and sacred chant and medieval music (though the music appears to be of modern composition) to produce that tone of exuberance which is so characteristic of the play.

Nor is there, in all this, any suggestion of that inane extravagance which seems to characterize a Cecil B. DeMille production. DeMille seems to believe in spectacle for spectacle's sake;⁵ J. Arthur Rank, and the Italian company that cooperated to produce this film, believe in a gorgeous but functional realism: the kind of rich realism which, in their opinion, was demanded by Shakespeare's text. Shakespeare could not have dreamed of the extraordinary resources of the movie camera, or the sound track, or the color film; but he himself provided the stage directions, as it were, that the producers tried to exploit by the use of these instruments. What we see and hear in the film version is merely the explicit rendering of the texture and local color implicit in Shakespeare's lines.

Shakespeare mentions Verona — and the film shows us Verona in all its exuberant richness. Shakespeare mentions a dance — and so we are shown the dance in all its splendor. Shakespeare mentions the nightingale — and the film records the singing of nightingales. Shakespeare mentions the friar's cell — and we are taken into the cloister.

Alas, however, for fallen humanity! Our virtues often carry with them their own weaknesses: and the gorgeous realism of this film also proves its own undoing. There is, after all, something to be said for Charles Lamb's paradoxical opinion that Shakespeare's plays, precisely because they are such

excellent plays, should not be acted on the stage at all. And if not on the stage, how much less on the vivid screen! "When the novelty is past," says Lamb, "we find to our cost that instead of realizing an idea, we have only materialized and brought down a fine vision to the standard of flesh and blood. We have let go a dream, in quest of an unattainable substance."⁶ And talking of *Macbeth*, Lamb goes on to say, "Contrary to the old saying, that 'seeing is believing,' the sight actually destroys the faith."⁷ Shakespeare's witches, so mysterious when imagined merely from a reading of Shakespeare's lines, become comical when seen on the stage.

Perhaps that is the trouble with this excellent film. But let us try to be coherent, and attempt an orderly examination of its merits and demerits.

2

Its chief merit, as we have indicated, is its capturing the exuberance of a renaissance city in the springtime of life when youth is in love, and in the hot summer when the blood is hot and brawls are frequent. In this connection, there are some delightful touches of acting or of photography which bespeak excellent directing.

For instance, there is the nest of fledglings in the cornice—symbol of young love. The camera directs attention to the nest every time Romeo comes in to the cloister to talk to Friar Laurence of his love for Juliet. Then there is the amusing incident—of course an interpolation—when Friar John tries to protest his being sent to Mantua with a letter for Romeo: Friar Laurence effectively squelches Friar John's protest with a wag of the finger and a solemn, "*Oboedientia non loquitur*." Most deft touch of all, the snatches of the hymn *Ave maris Stella* which Friar Laurence sings to himself as he putters about his garden or his cell—a clever device which brings in the authentic atmosphere of the monastery. The hymn brings the Blessed Virgin into the picture as effectively as the mural of the Annunciation in the Friar's room, or the wall shrine in Juliet's.

3

But precisely because it tries to portray everything realistically, the film perpetrates certain howlers which defeat the very purpose of realism. For instance, in the burial scenes, all the clergy and even the pall-bearers are made to wear miters—a headgear distinctively episcopal. Romeo, in trying to portray the emotions called for by his lines, succeeds only in looking like an effeminate adolescent (a phrase, incidentally, which we borrow from many students who saw the film.) The friars, in trying to look otherworldly, succeed only in looking like nincompoops. They prance about with mincing steps like simpletons deprived of all intelligence.

Then there is Juliet's visit to Friar Laurence's cell. In Shakespeare's time, with the type of stage used, this would have posed no difficulty. Friar Laurence would come on the stage talking to Paris; Juliet would enter, Paris would leave, Juliet would then break down with the cry:

Oh, shut the door, and when thou hast done so,
Come weep with me—past hope, past cure, past help.

—(IV. i. 44-45)⁸

The mention of "door" would be the audience's cue to think that the two are in some sort of room, the Friar's cell perhaps or the monastery parlor. But the film, with ultrarealism, brings us to a real monastery with cloistered walks around a central patio, and Friar Laurence's cell situated well within the cloister. Now this realism poses a realistic difficulty: for, according to the most stringent laws of the Church, the cloister — and *a fortiori* all habitations within the cloister — are off-limits to women. For the film, therefore, to portray Juliet as bursting into the monastery, and hurrying down the cloister (to the amazement of two friars, who, however, do nothing to stop her), inquiring her way to Friar Laurence's room, and, *being directed thereto* by a friar, bursting into the cell and asking the friar to shut the door

and when thou hast done so
Come weep with me:

all this, though very realistic indeed, destroys the very realism that had been intended. It is a dramatic solecism, amusing in its naiveté, and even Friar Laurence's interpolated "*Omnia munda mundis*" does not save the situation!

Or take the balcony scene. Again, in Shakespeare's time this would have caused no difficulty. Juliet would come out on the upper stage, Romeo on the lower; the audience could imagine the upper stage as a balcony, the lower as a garden; and the two lovers could profess their love to each other to their hearts' content. But the film — again by attempting to be entirely realistic — destroys the scene. Juliet is not put in a balcony, with Romeo (Cyrano fashion) in the garden below. Instead the cameras take us to a real Italian palace. The "balcony" in such a palace is really an arcaded corridor running along one side of the building. Juliet takes up her stand on this corridor, Romeo takes up his on the great stone stairway leading up from the patio. The whispered nothings of the lovers are not whispered at all — they could not be whispered in such a realistic setting; instead, they are shouted back and forth from these two vantage points. In such a situation, it becomes impossible to imagine why the entire Capulet household is not aroused! After all, the willing suspension of disbelief *does* have its limitations!

This is where realism defeats itself. Fidelity to the letter is often infidelity to the spirit. Charles Lamb is quite right: seeing is not believing, but on the contrary destroys faith.

I have referred to these as howlers because they are amusing. There is another kind of excessive fidelity to the text which is less amusing: there surely is no need to repeat the lewd joke which mars Shakespeare's text, nor, having repeated it, is there need to emphasize it by further iteration. It is said that Shakespeare never erased a line. Pope's reply is quite sharp as was Jonson's before him:

And fluent Shakespeare scarce effac'd a line.
Ev'n copious Dryden wanted, or forgot,
The last and greatest Art, the Art to blot.⁹

4

The film has succeeded in emphasizing certain important dramatic points in the play. One of these is the magnitude of Juliet's sacrifice in drinking the sleeping potion that is to bring on simulated death. The undergraduate student of Shakespeare's plays finds it difficult to take this sacrifice seriously. What (thinks he) is there alarming in going to sleep for "two and forty hours, and then awake as from a pleasant sleep"? (IV. i. 105-106).

The film effectively disabuses him of such a notion. It brings to the eye the sort of place which Laurence calls "that same ancient vault where all the kindred of the Capulets lie." (IV. i. 111-112) True, the film idealizes the tomb. In this one instance, there is no attempt at realism. No skeletons are shown; no worms crawling among the corpses; indeed, no corpses are seen except the very elegant "corpse" of the sleeping Juliet, and the "festering" corpse of Tybalt, which however is seen only for a moment and only from afar.

The absence of realistic portrayal is illustrated precisely by this corpse of Tybalt's. The presence of this rotting corpse should make the tomb an unbearable place for living nostrils, yet no sign is shown by Romeo or Juliet or the friar that the smell of putrefaction is perceived.

Despite this idealization, however, the film succeeds remarkably well in suggesting what it is that makes Juliet say, before she drinks the sleeping potion:

I have a faint cold fear thrills through my veins
That almost freezes up the heat of life.

—IV. iii. 15-16.

It is the thought of waking up in a tomb, sealed from all fresh air, with the possibility of suffocating:

How if, when I am laid in the tomb,
I wake before the time that Romeo
Come to redeem me?...
Shall I not then be stifled in the vault,

To whose foul mouth no healthsome air breathes in,
And there die strangled ere my Romeo comes?

—IV. iii. 30-35.

For a moment the horrible suspicion crosses her mind that the vial might contain real poison, and that she might never wake up:

What if it be a poison which the Friar
Subtly hath ministered to have me dead,
Lest in this marriage he should be dishonoured
Because he married me before to Romeo?

—IV. iii. 24-27.

It is an unjust thought, quickly dismissed. But the other thought cannot be dismissed: that of waking up alone in the darkness, among the corpses and the bones —

the terror of the place,
As in a vault, an ancient receptacle,
Where for this many hundred years the bones
Of all my buried ancestors are packed;
Where bloody Tybalt, yet but green in earth,
Lies festering in his shroud; where, as they say,
At some hours in the night spirits resort—
Alack, alack, is it not like that I
So early waking, what with loathsome smells
And shrieks...
... shall I not be distraught,
Environed with all these hideous fears,
And madly play with my forefathers' joints,
And pluck the mangled Tybalt from his shroud,
And in this rage, with some great kinsman's bone,
As with a club, dash out my desperate brains?

—IV. iii. 38-54.

A thought, surely, dreadful enough to chill the blood of a fourteen-year-old girl!

I have referred to the lack of realism in the portrayal of the tomb. But in the absence of stark realism, the film uses another means of emphasizing the presence of Tybalt's "festering" corpse in the tomb. This is done by a clever interpolation in the scene in Friar Laurence's cell. There is no mention of Tybalt's corpse in the text; but the scriptwriters have inserted

it in the film. "Wilt thou not be afraid when thou seest the corpse of thy cousin Tybalt?" Friar Laurence is made to say (or words to that effect) as he hands Juliet the vial. This is the kind of infidelity to the letter which achieves a greater fidelity to the drama; the opposite of ultrarealistic fidelity to the words which we complained of above, which results in loss of realistic effect. The lesson should be obvious to future producers of Shakespeare.

Another point — an important motive in the play — which the film emphasizes is the fact that Romeo and Juliet are husband and wife. Theirs are not the clandestine meetings of illicit love. In this respect their love is holy, their mutual devotion a fulfillment of marriage vows. Catholic theatre-goers have wondered at the validity of the rather abbreviated wedding ceremony portrayed in the film. But it should be remembered that the story is supposed to have happened in medieval times, before the decrees of Trent and before the code of canon law. Moreover, as indicated above, we need not seek a detailed realism in the portrayal of events.

The point is that the two are married, and that therefore the proposed marriage of Juliet and Paris is not only sentimentally abhorrent to Juliet, but legally impossible and morally sinful.

O nurse, how shall this be prevented?

My husband is on earth, my faith in heaven.

—III. v. 206-207.

Her faith, indeed, is in heaven. It is the plighted troth of a wife to her lawful husband. The tragedy is not in the fact that these two loved each other, nor in the intensity of that love, but in the manner of it that changes its nature from conjugal to idolatrous love.

5

In these matters, the film has exploited the play's strong points. But by its very realism it has also succeeded in demon-

strating the play's weaknesses: weaknesses, incidentally, which are not obvious until realistically portrayed.

The chief of these weaknesses is the impossible plot. How is it possible for a young man to love one woman to distraction one minute, and the next minute to be vowing eternal love to another woman, a love that leads to marriage in a day and to suicide in four? Coleridge to the contrary,¹⁰ this is incredible. This might be tolerable in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where men are turned to asses to show what fools these mortals be, but not in a serious play like *Romeo and Juliet*.

Another defect of the play which the film succeeds in emphasizing is that of "double time." Wilson invented the phrase to explain away the difficulties in *Othello*, and Furness applies it to explain away the difficulties in the *Merchant of Venice*, while Granville-Barker makes capital use of it in his prefaces to those two plays and to *Romeo and Juliet*. But no explaining away is possible when you see the thing happen on the screen! How can Friar John, who goes to Mantua and is walled up in a plague-stricken house there, get back to Verona before Juliet's "two and forty hours" of sleep are over?

A more serious difficulty comes from the extreme youth of both Romeo and Juliet. The latter is only fourteen—a point three times emphasized:

She hath not seen the change of fourteen years.
Let two more summers wither in their pride
Ere we may think her ripe to be a bride.

—I. ii. 9-11

"The first thing to mark about Juliet, for everything else depends on it," says Granville-Barker, "is that she is, to our thinking, a child. . . Her tragedy is a child's tragedy. . . Her bold innocence is a child's, her simple trust in her nurse; her passionate rage at the news of Tybalt's death. . . , her terrors when she takes the potion are doubly dreadful as childish terrors."¹¹ It must be said that the actress who played Juliet's role in the film deserved every praise. She looked like a child, and in many respects acted like one, yet with the poise and maturity required by the part.

The same could not be said of the actor who played Romeo—and truth to tell, it is not entirely his fault. Shakespeare's Romeo visibly ages under our very eyes. The Romeo of the balcony scene is a lad in his teens; the Romeo who buys poison from the apothecary (an incident omitted in the film version), or the Romeo who kills himself to "shake the yoke of inauspicious stars from this world-weary flesh" is an old man weary of life. This profound change in a character does not offend in the reading, but it is difficult to portray visibly.

The truth of the matter is that, despite the universal acclaim that this play has received, it is a very imperfect play. It is early Shakespeare, full of the vigor of youth, but lacking the profundity of a *Hamlet* or a *Macbeth* or a *Lear*.¹² Its charm is in its exquisite lines, of which there are many:

Madam, an hour before the worshiped sun
Peered forth the golden window of the east,
A troubled mind drave me to walk abroad.

—I. i. 125-127.

Night's candles are burn'd out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe upon the misty mountain-tops.

—III. v. 10-11.

Oh here
Will I set up my everlasting rest,
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this worldwearied flesh.

—V. iii. 109-112.

The play is studded with such gems as these. "Shakespeare meant the *Romeo and Juliet* to approach to a poem."¹³ It is a lyric, rather than a dramatic, masterpiece.

6

Yet it is not without dramatic power. It is called a tragedy, and deserves the name not only because it ends sadly, but because the wholesale catastrophe at the end is brought about by the human agents involved. It is not merely, as it has been called, a "tragedy of mischance": it is a tragedy of misdeeds. If there had been no unreasoning hatred between Capu-

lets and Montagues, if old Capulet had not been so ambitious to marry his daughter off to a Count, if he had been more understanding and less high-handed, if Romeo had not been so intent on self-destruction, and, having seen the apparently dead Juliet, had hied away to church for the good of her soul, or to bed for the good of his body, the story would have had a happy ending.

Indeed, the lovers, without their knowing it, were within an inch of such a happy ending. A little delay on Romeo's part, and the friar would have arrived in time to tell him all; then Juliet would have awakened, and they would have lived "happily ever after." But Romeo took the law (and his life) into his own hands. So did Juliet. Therein lies their tragedy.

A student who had just seen the film asked me why *Romeo and Juliet* should not be condemned like other pictures depicting suicide. The answer is obvious. Stories of suicide are objectionable if they glorify suicide or condone it. *Romeo and Juliet* does neither. Suicide is not presented as desirable, or admirable, or necessary. It is presented as tragic — that is to say, regrettable.

Regrettable also is the parents' tragedy. Friar Laurence (who knows that Juliet is really not dead) is merely simulating a reproach to the Capulets, playing with the word "heaven" which he uses four times in one speech. But there is grim dramatic irony in his words for he speaks far truer than he thinks:

The most you sought was her promotion,
For 'twas your heaven she should be advanced.
And weep ye now, seeing she is advanced
Above the clouds, as high as heaven itself?

—VI. v. 71 ff.

7

The basic cause of the tragedy is partly the family feud, but chiefly the notion of romantic love itself. Romantic love is not ordinary love. It is idolatrous love, — the love of Tristan and Isolde, the love of the troubadours. It is also selfish

love — the kind that makes the old man in *Wuthering Heights* exclaim to his deceased sweetheart: "May you be in torments!" It is the love of mute adoration of which Becquer speaks:

Pero mudo y absorto y de rodillas
Como se adora a Dios ante su altar,
Como yo te he querido...

It is the kind of love of the current love-song one hears from a hundred phonographs in Manila: *eres mi Dios, eres mi amor*.

If it is merely a pose (as such extravagant protestations often are), it is fit subject for merriment, the theme of a *Midsummer Night's Dream*, or an *As You Like It*; but if it is serious and deliberate, it becomes matter for tragedy.

This, then, is the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet. These two young lovers begin with a healthy, ingenuous love; but their love does not remain healthy. True love ends where self-love begins: and it is selfishness, not true love, to refuse to live on without one's beloved.

Call it folly, rather than wickedness. Call it understandable folly. It is folly none the less that leads them to destruction. Juliet blames heaven for her misfortunes:

Is there no pity sitting in the clouds
That sees into the bottom of my grief?
.
.
.
Alack, alack, that heaven should practice stratagems
Upon so soft a subject as myself!

—III. v. 188 ff.

And there is dramatic irony in Friar Laurence's admonition to Juliet's parents — his words containing more truth than he himself is aware of at the moment:

The heavens do lour upon you for some ill;
Move them no more by crossing their high will.

—IV. v. 94-95.

But in the final analysis, in this, as in all other Shakespearean tragedies, the fault is not in our stars but in ourselves. Romeo and Juliet are not victims merely of circumstances entirely be-

yond their control: they are victims of human folly, their parents' and their own.

This, then, is Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, brilliantly, if not perfectly, presented on the screen. It seems regrettable that Mercutio's character seems shadowy on the screen. Shakespeare made much of him. Indeed, there are critics who say that Mercutio would have run away with the play had Shakespeare not killed him off in the middle of it.¹⁴

If we were to award a prize for the best acting, we would give it to the Nurse. "The Nurse," said Samuel Johnson, "is one of the characters in which the Authour delighted: he has, with great subtilty of distinction, drawn her at once loquacious and secret, obsequious and insolent, trusty and dishonest."¹⁵ Thus she is in Shakespeare's text: thus she was on the screen.¹⁶

* * *

¹ W. Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, 1817 (ed. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, London, 1952, p. 110).

² S. T. Coleridge, "Recapitulation and Summary of the Characteristics of Shakespeare's Dramas," (p. 52 in the Everyman edition of his *Lectures on Shakespeare*).

³ *Loc. cit.*

⁴ Coleridge, *Notes on Romeo and Juliet (Lectures, pp. 103-104)*.

⁵ DeMille is not alone in this. A recent staging of the *Romeo and Juliet* story at the Louvre in Paris appears to have been a magnificent spectacle for spectacle's sake. On a three-level stage built against the clock tower of the Louvre, singers sang and a ballet company danced to the music of Berlioz before an audience of some 8,000 people. *Time* (11 July 1955) quotes *France-Soir* as remarking that the Louvre itself was the best attraction of the evening.

⁶ Lamb, *On the Tragedies of Shakespeare considered with reference to their fitness for Stage Representation*, 1811 (*apud* D. Nichol Smith ed., *Shakespeare Criticism: A Selection*, London, 1953, p. 192).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁸ References to the text are to G. B. Harrison's edition of the complete works of Shakespeare (New York, 1952).

⁹ *Epistle to Augustus* 279-281.

¹⁰ Coleridge seems at first sight to have a good case. He says: "... it affords a strong instance of (Shakespeare's) insight into the nature of the passions, that Romeo is introduced already love-bewildered. The necessity of loving creates an object for itself in man and woman; and yet there is a difference in this respect between the sexes, though only to be known by a perception of it. It would have displeased us if Juliet had been represented as already in love, or as fancying herself so;—but no one, I believe, ever experiences any shock at Romeo's forgetting his Rosaline, who had been a mere name for the

yearning of his youthful imagination, and rushing into his passion for Juliet. Rosaline was a mere creation of his fancy..." (*Literary Remains*, 1836, II, 152. Page 103 in the Everyman edition of the *Lectures*). The only trouble with Coleridge's opinion is that it does not sufficiently explain the *instantaneous* change from Rosaline to Juliet. People in love with someone can and do fall in love with someone else: but by a gradual process that requires time. There is love at first sight; but men fall out of love gradually—or so it seems. White's opinion is both sensible and scathing: "What wonderful psychological knowledge has one of Shakespeare's later critics found in the bringing of Romeo upon the scene enamoured of Rosaline, to have his passion supplanted by the purer and tenderer one for Juliet! which, on the contrary, critics of the last century regarded as a great fault... But the truth, which these critics did not know is that in this transfer of affection Shakespeare merely followed the novel and the poem to which he went for his plot..." (*apud* Furness, Variorum edition, Philadelphia 1873, pp. 20-21).

¹¹ H. Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, II (Princeton 1951), 343 f.

¹² The critics are fairly well agreed on this point. The older critics were fairly unanimous: Malone (1821) argued to an early date from the number of rhymed lines; from other circumstances he concluded "with great precision that it must have been produced between July 23, 1596 and April 17, 1597." Knight (1838) put the play farther back. Following Tyrwhitt's lead, he argued from the allusion to an earthquake that "the play was produced, as well as written, in 1591." Collier (ed. 1, 1842) rejects the argument from the earthquake and supports Malone's conclusion. Staunton (1857) favors the view that the play was written in 1591, or 1592, or a year later. Verplanck (1847) says: "This tragedy bears the internal evidence of having been written in the period of the transition of Shakespeare's mind from a purely poetical to a dramatic cast of thought." Hudson (1856) plays safe by saying that the play was produced between 1591 and 1595. Dyce (1857) agrees with Tyrwhitt that "as early as 1591 Sh. may have been at work on this play." And Clarke (1864) argues for an earlier date than 1591. (*Vide* Furness, Variorum Edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, Philadelphia, 1873, pp. 408-415.) So much for the older critics. Recent scholarship does not seem to have reversed their opinion. G. B. Harrison assigns 1594 or 1595 as the probable date of the play. (*Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, New York, 1952, 468.) If we remember that *Macbeth* was written probably in 1606 and *The Tempest* about 1611, I think we can safely say *Romeo and Juliet* is early Shakespeare.

¹³ Coleridge, *Lit. Rem.* (Everyman edition of the *Lectures*, p. 103).

¹⁴ John Palmer, *Comic Characters of Shakespeare* (London 1953), p. 111.

¹⁵ Johnson's edition, 1765 (in *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Walter Raleigh, London 1908, p. 188).

¹⁶ There is one other sequence in the film where verisimilitude seems wanting. It is Romeo's "gatecrashing" of the Capulet party. As represented in the film, it is difficult to see how he could have gotten in at all. Two notes on this point would have helped the director solve this problem. One is Granville-Barker's (*Prefaces*, II, 305, note 2). The other is Clarke's, which Furness cites in the Variorum edition (p. 38).