

Clinging to Shakespeare: A Desperate Parent's Reading of *Romeo and Juliet*

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"Thou shall not stir a foot to seek a foe."

Lady Montague, Act One, Scene One.

Lady Montague's Lament

For over a decade, I've taught *Romeo and Juliet* to hundreds of teenagers in my Freshman English class. It's the one Shakespearean play that all students are excited to read and already know. At least, they *think* they know it: the star-crossed lovers, the bitter feud, the romantic and tragic deaths. Each year, my students and I lose ourselves in these four tragic days in Verona. No matter the time period, kids can relate. Unfortunately, so can I, but not from the role of the romantic lovers.

I, sadly, am a parent of a lovelorn teen.

Today, the tragedy is playing out in my own home. Rather than being a tale of ultimate tragic romance, *Romeo and Juliet* is a horror story. My own young Romeo, my sixteen year old son, has fallen desperately in love. That in itself isn't the problem. The problem is that his romance is fraught with manipulation, deceitfulness, and isolation, and has turned him against his family and his friends. Slowly, my son has slipped away into a dream of a romance that, to an outsider, cannot have a happy ending. Suddenly, I have been cast in the role of Lady Montague, the weakest character in the play, with a sum total of three lines in the entire drama. And, she is the only parent to die in the course of the play. Great.

And so, what is this mother to do? If the mother, like me, is an English teacher, she turns

to Shakespeare, clinging to the wisdom and wit so prevalent in his work.

“Under love's heavy burden do I sink.”

Romeo, Act One, Scene One.

Shakespeare’s life lesson as a disillusioned Romeo.

I find that my mind keeps turning back to Shakespeare’s life. Shakespeare himself had his own unhappy teenage romance, one that turned into a life sentence, one that soured under the pressure of an early pregnancy and the reality of supporting a family, one that he only escaped through his career as a playwright in London, far from his own family in Stratford. I wonder what he thought as he wrote *Romeo and Juliet*, what advice he might have given to his own parents as he carried out his own troubled romance with Anne Hathaway? Perhaps *Romeo and Juliet* is his attempt to provide us struggling, foolish parents with some insight into troubled teen relationships: *Romeo and Juliet* as a parenting manual, a sort of What Not To Do. Why not? I’ve read the play over fifty times with my students, can quote act, scene, and line—surely there is something in the play to act as a cautionary tale to me, an English teacher mother who is searching for answers.

“Here’s much to do with hate, but more with love.”

Romeo, Act One, Scene One.

It’s not the feud, stupid.

Every year, I give my students the following prompt: Who or what is responsible for Romeo and Juliet’s death? Inevitably, the majority of students blame the feud, and there is no doubt that it made the star-crossed lovers’ situation worse. But I’ve come to the conclusion that the feud simply isn’t the true culprit. So many of my students are surprised to learn that Romeo and Juliet’s parents never forbid the romance—in fact, they

were clueless about their children's romance and marriage until act five, scene three, when they stand around the bodies of their children. Of course, the lovers assumed that their parents' feud prohibited their relationship and thus hid it. However, this isn't why they died. Their deaths really come down to a lack of communication and follow-through.

Could we but learn from whence his sorrows grow/ We would as willingly give cure as know. Montague, Act One, Scene One.

The Montague's Flaw: Good Intentions Spoiled by Poor Follow-through

In act one, scene one, Lord and Lady Montague have the right idea. After the Prince's ultimatum following the foolish riot that breaks out when Capulet and Montague servants quarrel in the town square, the Montagues enlist Romeo's friend and cousin Benvolio to help discover the source of Romeo's depression. Benvolio promises, "I'll learn his grievance, or be much denied." And soon, Benvolio does learn of Romeo's "grievance"—he has been rejected by a young lady, Rosaline, who happens, we learn later in this scene, to be a niece of Capulet. She has told Romeo that she "has sworn to live chaste"—to become a nun. I've always thought that this was a polite way of letting an unsuitable boy down: "It's not you, it's me." Perhaps Rosaline had the good sense to realize that the feud made the conditions of their romance nearly impossible, and that she wasn't willing to risk all that must be risked for a romance with the only son of her family's enemy. Too bad Rosaline wasn't a greater influence on Juliet.

Enlisting a friend of Romeo's to help was a loving in act in this play (although in *Hamlet* it is not, and foolish Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pay the price for that). The problem is that there is no follow-through. When do we next see the Montagues? After Romeo has

killed Tybalt in retaliation of his best friend Mercutio's murder, defending their son to the prince. And next, in the Capulet tomb, surrounding the bodies of their fallen children, when Montague reports that his wife has died that night from grief of Romeo's banishment. Why don't we see them earlier, figuring out why Romeo did not come home after the Capulet party (which I'm sure they had no idea he was crashing in the first place)? Were they so involved in their own lives, so relieved to see the smile on his face brought on by the rebound romance with Juliet that they didn't ask where he was, and why he was so suddenly happy? Did they even talk to Benvolio and learn of Romeo's problem in the first place? The Montagues parented too little, too late. While some may say that young men must be given their freedom and that the Montagues were right to keep a loose leash, it's clear that Romeo did not have the emotional maturity and coping skills to handle the situation, and that more involved guidance of his parents may have saved him.

All these woes shall serve/For sweet discourses in our time to come.

Romeo, Act Three, Scene 5

Transforming tragedy to comedy

So what am I, a mother who wants to avoid this fate, to take from this? I most certainly don't want to be doomed to Lady Montague's fate of an early death caused by her teenage son, even though that possibility seems real and understandable. By demonstrating the grave danger that being out of touch with your teen can create, Shakespeare shows us that parents need to stay connected. Being concerned is good, but it isn't enough. We need to stay in our kids' business, even when they make it difficult for us and don't want to talk. Lord Montague complained to Benvolio that Romeo is "his

own affections' counselor," unwilling to confide in his father the source of his sadness.

That in itself is a red flag.

For modern parents, staying involved in our kids' lives will probably involve technology.

Imagine if the Montagues could have pulled up Romeo's text messages, like my husband and I were able to do using Google Voice. They could have followed poor Romeo being

dumped by Rosaline, or could have followed his tweets during the Capulet party, and sent someone to pull him out of the lion's den before he laid eyes on the lovely Juliet. As my

husband and I read the drama that played out in our own son's text messages, the sense of guilt from invading our son's privacy was quickly replaced by a sense of gratitude—we

were so glad we knew all the sneaky stuff, the manipulation and bad advice, so that we could deal with the real issue at hand and not be distracted constantly by red herrings.

Parents have got to follow-up. When our kids go AWOL, emotionally or physically,

we've got to get out there and find him. We've got to keep asking questions until we get

answers. Had Lady Montague given Romeo the same advice she gave her husband

(which he ignored, of course)—“*Thou shall not stir a foot to seek a foe*”—and made sure

Romeo followed it, both she and her son might have been saved.

But don't expect Romeo and Juliet to present you with the #1 Mom coffee mug. My own

little Romeo is furious at me for ruining his life, because after a particularly brutal and scary weekend, I organized an ambush with the rest of the family during a family party.

Before he knew what had hit him, my Romeo was in the middle of LAX, boarding a plane with his grandparents. We sent him far, far away from Verona for the summer.

How true is Benvolio's warning that summer heat equates to foul tempers: “For now,

these hot days, is the mad blood stirring.” If my son's “mad blood” is stirred in the heat,

if he is determined to put himself in danger, it's my prerogative to remove him from it and give him time and distance to cool down. My poor, lovelorn son is spending the summer working at Camp Boondocks under the supervision of his father, hopefully remembering that there is more to life than doomed romance. Perhaps with Shakespeare's guidance, we can turn *Romeo and Juliet* into *Much Ado About Nothing*. Wish us luck.