
Maurice Hunt, ed. *Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*. NY: Modern Language Association, 2000. 219p.

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As one of Shakespeare's most popular and accessible plays, *Romeo and Juliet* is an excellent choice for inclusion in the MLA *Approaches to Teaching* series. The diversity of interpretations in this volume illustrates the richness and complexity of a play too often seen as simply a tale of fate and star-crossed lovers, and the essays challenge this traditional reading of *Romeo and Juliet* as the greatest love story ever. Furthermore, the broad cross-section of material is suitable for a range of classroom environments, from middle school through college, small seminars to state-wide telecourses.

A number of the contributions examine *Romeo and Juliet* from a distinctly modern viewpoint, considering such issues as the generation gap, teenage suicide, and rock and roll music. Sara Munson Deats notes how the collapse of communication bridges the centuries and, citing specific instances of high school suicides, offers a cautionary tale about placing in context a play that "has a special resonance for young people today" (108). Cynthia Marshall draws congruencies between teenage love and music of the 1950s and 1960s, paralleling, for instance, Romeo's gloomy self-indulgence and the notion of female romanticism with hit songs by Roy Orbison, The Crystals, and other popular singers.

More traditional approaches to *Romeo and Juliet* consider the play's genre, its social context, and gender issues. Douglas Bruster, for instance, posits the play as a comedy within a tragedy, exploring the nature of tragicomedy in the process, while Jennifer Low places it within the context of other tragedies, relating the play to theoretical studies by Aristotle, Northrop Frye, and other critics, and noting its distinction from classical tragedy. Dorothea Kehler locates the play in early modern Europe and considers how Elizabethan social conditions—such as religion, censorship, bigamy, and economic inequities—shape an informed reading of the play. In considering issues of sexuality, Thomas Moisan argues that "gender and desire are integrally, but intricately, related" (48), noting both the irruptive and repressive effects, while Nicholas F. Radel delineates erotic and homoerotic aspects of the play.

Some essays take a comparative approach with other Shakespeare plays, the most popular being *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, based on similarities in issues, characters, and, to some degree, structure. Thomas Blackburn considers *Romeo and Juliet* in a trio with two other "ampersand" plays: *Troilus and Cressida* and

Antony and Cleopatra, comparing such aspects as the nature of oppositions and the modes of loving within each. Essays that approach the play through a specific character or textual passage are quite useful for professors who face inevitably stringent time constraints. Michael Basile, for example, explores the mother-daughter relationship through a focus on a single scene (I.3); Paul Voss takes on the generally overlooked character of Friar Laurence, noting that he speaks more lines than any other character besides the main couple; and Arthur F. Kinney considers the role of the Chorus, questioning the purpose of revealing the play's outcome at the outset. The phenomenon of the text's bowdlerization generates a provocative essay by James R. Andreas, Sr., who reminds us that *Romeo and Juliet* is "arguably one of Shakespeare's bloodiest tragedies and certainly his bawdiest" (115), discussing his approach to the issue of literacy and the consequences of stripping the play "of its life-affirming erotic language" (124).

Not surprisingly, the familiarity of the play and the many filmed versions of *Romeo and Juliet* provide material for thoughtful examinations of the play's theatrical and performative aspects. James Hirsh offers useful ideas about counteracting the preconceptions students bring to the play through examining its dramatic technique; along the same lines, Stephen M. Buhler suggests that instructors can "break through received notions about the play" by having students "reenact less familiar and strongly divergent stage interpretations of selected scenes" (172). Robert F. Willson, Jr. compares three film versions within their cultural contexts: Irving Thalberg's 1936 production with Leslie Howard and Norma Shearer, Franco Zeffirelli's stunningly romantic 1968 version with Olivia Hussey, and Baz Luhrmann's 1996 contemporary reinvention. As Willson notes, the use of film versions—unavoidable with media-saturated students—"allows teachers and students to go beyond conventional discussions of character and theme" and to help students realize that no definitive interpretation of the play really exists. And in his essay, Ivo Kamps uses Romeo's "drug-induced disorientation" of Luhrmann's film "as a starting point for re-evaluating the love" between the pair and to consider the notion of "love madness" (38).

While the essays in this volume are all valuable, some are less accessible than others, weighted down by jargon and theory; others provide blueprints for implementing the specific classroom methodology discussed. Like the other volumes in the *MLA Approaches to Teaching* series, this one is organized into two parts: "Materials" and "Approaches." Although the former section is useful primarily for scholarly purposes, it is particularly helpful for non-Shakespearean scholars, who face the daunting mountain of studies. Editor Maurice Hunt offers guidance for the selection of complete Shakespearean editions as well as single editions of *Romeo*

and Juliet. Equally valuable is his overview of critical, background, textual, and performance studies, along with an assessment of the visual and artistic media available to instructors of all levels.

Romeo and Juliet is a valuable addition to the already valuable *MLA Approaches to Teaching* series, which provides powerful pedagogical tools to educate and inform students as well as professors, and which spark creative and innovative ideas for making the classroom as rich and satisfying a learning environment as possible. ✨