**In Defense of Romeo and Juliet: It's Not Childish, It's *About* Childishness**

**By NOAH BERLATSKY**

I haven't read Romeo and Juliet since I was in high school 25 years ago. High school is, of course, a time of rampaging hormones and extravagant romantic angst; in theory, the perfect life moment to read Romeo and Juliet. In practice... eh. I think my favorite character was Mercutio. I thought he was funny.

I just reread the play last week, inspired by Alyssa Rosenberg's declaration at Slate that "Romeo and Juliet is a terrible play." The comments section erupted in howls of outrage... but I was intrigued. Suddenly, I was curious to find out what I thought of a work I hadn't revisited in more than two decades.

Rosenberg argued that "Romeo and Juliet—a play about children—is full of terrible, deeply childish ideas about love." Juliet, Rosenberg reminds us, is 13. If you cast someone that age in the role now, the result is queasy. If you cast someone older, you end up with an adult actor behaving like she's a tween. Romeo's age is uncertain, but a lot of what he does is immature, and adolescent as well. The lovers' haste to marry strains credulity—it seems (though Rosenberg doesn't quite say this) like a childish fantasy of love at first sight. Similarly, the reconciliation of the lovers' warring families upon their demise reads for Rosenberg as "an adolescent fantasy of death solving all problems."

Adolescent or not, though, I sure enjoyed reading it this time through. Romeo and Juliet's first meeting, for example, all by itself validates the romantic comedy genre.

ROMEO

[To JULIET] If I profane with my unworthiest hand

This holy shrine, the gentle ﬁne is this:

My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand

To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

JULIET

Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,

Which mannerly devotion shows in this;

For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,

And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

ROMEO

Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

JULIET

Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

That is some searingly saucy banter, there. "Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer" has to be one of the archest lines in all of literature. I'm with Romeo. I'd fall in love with that.

In short, now that I'm an adult, I appreciate the young lovers a good bit more than I did when I was their age. This may be counterintuitive... but it also seems to be one of the main points of the play itself.

A number of Rosenberg's commenters noted that Romeo and Juliet is deliberately about young love. This is no doubt true. But the play is also, and insistently, about age. The fact that Juliet is 13, for example, is not just mentioned once. It comes up again and again. Moreover, the first time Juliet appears on stage, her aged comic Nurse launches into a rambling anecdote about when her charge was a toddler, an anecdote that Juliet clearly finds both tedious and embarrassing. Juliet's youth, then, is adamantly established, and also adamantly presented as a source of fascination for the elderly.

Old/young remains an obsession throughout the play—but that obsession does not, interestingly, work in any single way. Sometimes, being young means being rash and changeable, as when Romeo switches his hyperbolic affections from Rosalind to Juliet. Sometimes, it means being a hope for the future—as when the Friar marries the couple to try to end the feud between Montagues and Capulets. There are passages where old and young are presented as almost different species, as when Juliet irritably declaims, " ...old folks, many feign as they were dead; /Unwieldy, slow, heavy and pale as lead."

And then there are moments where it seems like old and young don't really act all that differently. Juliet's hasty marriage to Romeo, for example, isn't much more precipitous than Lord Capulet's sudden decision to marry her to Paris. And Romeo's affections aren't any more changeable than those of the nurse, who, having cheerfully helped Juliet marry Romeo, just as cheerfully advises her to forget that first marriage and turn polyandrist by wedding as her father wishes.

Rosenberg might argue that even the adults behave like kids in Romeo and Juliet because the play itself is childish. But... is Capulet really childish? Is the nurse? Surely, you don't have to be young to be precipitate or fickle. Adults behave like children with some frequency. And—if having sex is considered to be adult behavior—vice versa.

For Romeo and Juliet, in other words, youth and age seem less like solid, immutable categories than like tropes. They're devices manipulated by Juliet or Romeo to give force to their sense of indignation or specialness. Or manipulated by the nurse to give force to her affection and nostalgia. Or manipulated by Shakespeare to sweep (adults?) into a romantic swoon. Or manipulated by Rosenberg, to denigrate that same swooning. From this perspective, the point of the play isn't so much the exhilaration of young love or the dunderheadedness of young love. Rather (as often with Shakespeare) the point is the language itself: the dazzling, disturbing rhetorical force of old/young, corrupt/innocent, experienced/naïve.

Rosenberg claims that Romeo and Juliet is dated because of the uncomfortable way its childishness, and its child protagonists, sit in our contemporary culture. I'd argue, though, that that uncomfortableness is not a contemporary addition, but is instead one of the things Shakespeare was writing about to begin with. At that first flirtatious meeting, for example, Romeo is masked with friends at a Capulet party. Old Capulet, seeing the maskers, reminisces about when he used to do the same.

CAPULET

What, man! 'tis not so much, 'tis not so much:

'Tis since the nuptials of Lucentio,

Come pentecost as quickly as it will,

Some ﬁve and twenty years; and then we mask'd.

Second Capulet

'Tis more, 'tis more, his son is elder, sir;

His son is thirty.

CAPULET

Will you tell me that?

His son was but a ward two years ago.

ROMEO

[To a Servingman] What lady is that, which doth

enrich the hand

Of yonder knight?

Capulet slips back through time... and when he stops slipping, it is Romeo who speaks and goes to woo Juliet. Capulet was Romeo, Romeo is Capulet—and so, by substitution, the lover of the daughter is the father. The mask is a device not so much to enable young love, as to enable the old to imagine young love.

In Romeo and Juliet play-acting with the categories of adult and child can lead to exhilarating delight, pleasurably moralistic revulsion and, sometimes, to tragedy. If, in our own day, we have pushed the onset of adulthood past the tweens, past the teens, and even to some degree up into the 20s—that makes the play's insights and its sometimes exasperating perversities more relevant, not less.

**What is Berlatsky’s main argument in this article? Write it in your own words.**

[If you’re having trouble, ask yourself: what is he saying about Romeo and Juliet? Is he saying it is good, or bad? Why is it good/bad? How does it affect the reader?]

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**What three quotes from the text most clearly support his argument? Go through the text and highlight them.**

**Now, on the next sheet of paper, write a paragraph that begins:**

Noah Berlatsky’s article, “In Defense of Romeo and Juliet: It's Not Childish, It's *About* Childishness” argues that \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Then, support your sentence with three (or more) **embedded** quotes.

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