

# Constructing and portraying the apothecary's character

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From the bawdy Mercutio to the gentle Juliet, the characters in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* are colorful, but purposeful. Even the most obscure characters reflect Shakespeare's calculations in the development of key themes throughout the play. The Apothecary particularly exemplifies a character who seems superfluous outside of his role in the plot. However, his conversation with Romeo in Act Five, Scene One, proves that this is not the case. Rather, Shakespeare's inclusion of the Apothecary fortifies the themes of fate and society versus the individual. Equally importantly, it unifies the connection between symbols and mood.

One of the foremost themes in *Romeo and Juliet* is that of fate. This surprise is not long in coming, as the prologue introduces "a pair of star-cross'd lovers" whose deaths were destined to end the feud between their families (1. 1. 6). From beginning to end, celestial authority drives the characters to the closing stage by mingling their circumstances with dramatic irony.

Uninvited and unwelcome, Romeo goes to a party held by Lord Montague, his father's enemy. There, he falls in love with Montague's young daughter, Juliet. Both realize too late that their affections violate their families' enmity, but the flame of young love burns so brightly that they marry in secret. At this point, one could interpret fate as a fortuitous force that brings true love to the two unlikeliest of youth.

As fate continues to drive the plot, however, fortune ceases smiling on the lovers. The family feud interferes on their wedding night, when a series of brawls leaves two men dead, one Capulet and one Montague, and banishes Romeo from beautiful Verona. In his absence, Juliet is hastily betrothed and

her wedding arranged. Desperate to avoid this second unwanted marriage, Juliet seeks the aid of Friar Lawrence, the well-meaning clergyman who married her and Romeo. Friar Lawrence gives her a potion that will put her in a death-like sleep, then sends word to Romeo about the scheme. Romeo never receives the Friar's letter, however, and hears only that his beloved has died. Overcome with anguish, Romeo recalls an impoverished apothecary he had seen earlier. Romeo finds the Apothecary in his eerie shop and convinces him to sell a dram of poison for the price of 40 gold coins. The Apothecary's consent is the true beginning of Romeo's physical demise. Moreover, it is the fateful blow in determining Juliet's heartrending death when she wakes to find a lifeless Romeo at her side.

Although the Apothecary is primarily an instrument of the lovers' destiny, he is also part of Shakespeare's thematic representation of fate. It is no coincidence that Romeo was banished to Mantua, whereupon he notices this poor apothecary. Romeo recalls this detail almost immediately after being misled in believing Juliet is dead. His memory is his enemy as he remembers the thoughts he had when he first saw this apothecary:

Noting this penury, to myself I said,

“ An' if a mad did need a poison now,

Whose sale is present death in Mantua,

Here lives a caitiff wretch would sell it him.” (5. 1. 49-52)

The Apothecary is so gaunt and ragged that Romeo assumes that the Apothecary's strength of mind is malleable. Although selling poison is a crime punishable by death, Romeo speculates that the man's destitution would lead him to be easily swayed.

Romeo's speculation is correct, a fact that tends to another thematic train running through the play, the struggle between an individual and his society. The Apothecary is clothed in "tatter'd weeds," simple rags, and is so deprived of food that his "overwhelming brows" could rival those of famine victims (5. 1. 39). Despite his dire straits, the Apothecary refuses Romeo's first offer for the poison by protesting that the law forbids it. Moreover, it is by pain of death that he initially refuses to sell Romeo's own death to him. Romeo perseveres, however, observing that "Contempt and beggary hangs upon thy back; The world is not thy friend, nor the world's law" (5. 1. 72-3). In other words, the Apothecary is not bound by the law because his penury holds him in social contempt. More literally, the law is no ally to the Apothecary because it checks his business. Romeo's words also find the Apothecary's weakness by reasoning that his social oppression is no fault of his own; rather, it is a failing on behalf of a world that "affords no law to make thee rich," or has no counterbalance for the law that restricts the Apothecary's business (5. 1. 74). In this respect, Romeo is suggesting that the Apothecary has a right to fulfill his needs, even unlawfully, because they have been so grossly neglected.

The moral issues of selling the poison to Romeo are also relevant to the theme of the individual's struggle against society. Although the Apothecary

is well aware of the consequences of selling Romeo his poison, he only resists Romeo's offer once. As they make the exchange, the Apothecary defends his humanity, insisting " My poverty, but not my will, consents" (5. 1. 75). With this the Apothecary acknowledges that he is trading one form of poverty for another. That is, his destitution does not dissipate with his financial gain; it merely takes the form of moral bankruptcy. The Apothecary's nonexistent guilt for selling death to the despairing Romeo is also indicated by his brevity, for he says nothing else on the moral matter. Rather, it is Romeo who recognizes the immorality in the exchange, saying:

There is thy gold, worse poison to men's souls,

Doing more murder in this loathsome world,

Than these poor compounds that thou mayest not sell.

I sell thee poison, thou hast sold me none. (5. 1. 80-4)

Romeo's speech identifies the true poison as money, and observes that society's ban on selling poison is ill-applied, considering how much more evil is brought about by money. The Apothecary is only a pawn in the scheme of this moral theme, but this lowly position is enough to demonstrate that society, and not the individual, is as destitute as the Apothecary.

Interestingly, Romeo's last line condemns not the Apothecary, but himself and also society as those guilty of the crime.

Besides using the Apothecary as a thematic reinforcement in the play, Shakespeare also depends upon his characterization in Act Five, Scene One,

to create a very specific mood that reflects its view on poison. Romeo's description of the Apothecary and his shop has a powerful effect on the mood. According to him, the Apothecary is a walking cadaver. As far as his shop, Romeo notes that it houses a creepy collection of animal skins, a tortoise shell, "Remnants of packthread, and old cakes of roses" (5. 1. 42). The shop seems all but abandoned as Romeo approaches it, and when the Apothecary appears, Romeo may as well be talking to the ghost of a mausoleum. Here, the Apothecary and his shop represent the evil nature of mortal drugs through their own death-like appearances. Just as the Apothecary's dram of poison meant to drain the life from the veins of the living, his own lack of money, what Romeo calls the true poison, has drained life from him. This is essentially what Romeo means when he asks, "Art thou so bare and full of wretchedness, And fearest to die? Famine is in thy cheeks, need and oppression starveth in thy eyes" (5. 1. 69-70). In other words, Romeo is saying that the Apothecary is so near death himself that he has no loss to fear.

The mood of Act Two, Scene Three, is quite different from the Apothecary's debut and is likewise reflective of its view of poison. A pensive friar is picking herbs in the early morn's "streaks of light" that precede the sun's full rise, an event that he gives a striking description of: "fleckled darkness...reels From forth day's path and Titan's [fiery] wheels" (2. 3. 2-4). As the Friar fills his basket, he contemplates the inherent value of herbal drugs, which have a "powerful grace" for healing and thus are good (2. 3. 15). He duly acknowledges, however, that "stumbling on abuse, Virtue itself turns vice,

being misapplied" (2. 3. 20-1). Literally, the Friar is saying that misuse of drugs is as much of an evil as proper use is good. Aside from this observation, the overall view is that drugs have healing purposes, which matches the hopeful mood of a dawning day. What Shakespeare clearly illustrates through the thematic and artistic significant of the Apothecary is the antithesis of this whole idea that only virtues " misapplied" turn to vice (2. 3. 21). With respect to the role of the Apothecary, his influence is underestimated when we assume that selling the poison will harm no one but Romeo. The Apothecary's mortal dram reeks of such evil intentions that, in taking Romeo's life, it takes Juliet's as well. As fate would have it, the mood of the Apothecary's ethereal domain is the foreboding precursor to this tragic conclusion. One can only hope that, despite the ruin of Romeo and his Juliet, the Apothecary spent well his 40 ducats.