

The use of religious imagery in romeo and juliet

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Throughout *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare makes heavy use of religious imagery, especially when concerned with the young couple. This imagery serves two purposes in the play. It underlines the purity of Romeo and Juliet's love by associating it with a pure feeling such as religion, and it creates an escape from their damnation according to Christian values by creating the religion of love.

In the Christian faith, which was ubiquitous in Shakespeare's England, suicide is against God's will, and therefore punishable by eternal damnation. As Paul Budra points out in the Study Guide, it would have been rather unpleasant for Shakespeare to leave his audience with an image of Romeo and Juliet in Hell. Therefore he had to find a way to "get around this problem" (43). The lovers, in a sense, create their own religion. This is exemplified from their first meeting. When Romeo sees Juliet for the first time, he says, "O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright! / It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night / As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear" (Shakespeare, 1. 4. 157-9). His language here suggests their love standing out as a light against darkness. With Verona being a warring city state of Italy at the time, the Capulets and the Montagues being enemies, and the couple having everyone opposing their union, they had quite a lot of darkness to compete with. However, instead of being incorporated into this darkness, Romeo suggests here that their love stands separate from it as a bright light. This imagery creates a separate world for them. They are not a part of the same world, and therefore they are free to make their own rules, including religion. They do just that in the following sonnet of their first meeting. When Romeo says, "touching hers, make blessed my rude hand"

(1. 4. 164), he reintroduces the theme of religion and it sets the ground for the upcoming sonnet, which is filled with religious imagery. Romeo compares himself with a pilgrim, a person on a holy journey to visit a saint or a relic of a saint. He compares Juliet with the saint itself. Like a pilgrim might feel when approaching a saint, he says that his hand is unworthy to touch this “ holy shrine” (1. 4. 206-9). By comparing them to these holy figures, Romeo is setting up their own religion.

Juliet elaborates on his conceit, saying, “ Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much... For saints have hands that pilgrims’ hands do touch” (1. 4. 210-2). She accepts his metaphor, and therefore, her part in the religion he has created for them. As they go on, every word said contains a religious symbol for love. For example, in line 215, Juliet’s use of the word prayer suggests not only the religious connotation, but also “ supplication to a person”, or the “ courtship of a lady” (Shakespeare, 197). In line 216, Romeo says “ let lips do what hands do,” suggesting that they put theirs together like one’s hands in prayer. The analogies pile on each other with more and more urgency, ultimately leading to the lovers’ first kiss, sealing their subscription to their newfound faith, the religion of love. During the balcony scene, Romeo calls Juliet his “ bright angel,” a “ winged messenger of heaven” (2. 1. 69-71), comparing her again to a saint. Their faithfulness to their new religion at times verges on blasphemous. For example, Juliet calls Romeo “ the god of her idolatry” (2. 1. 157) She rejects God and the Christian faith and replaces it with a new one. Romeo is her God now, it is he that she will worship and pray to and idolize. This may have shocked audience members of Shakespeare’s time, or it might have simply set in

their minds the idea of Romeo and Juliet's religion of love. If the couple is exempt from Christianity and its rules, then they must also be exempt from its damnation. One might even say that the idea of dying for someone else's sake is a Christian theme. Christ let himself be killed on the cross for the sins of mankind. Romeo and Juliet killed themselves for each other's sake, or for the sake of love. If they are creating a new religion, they would be the martyrs. In essence, the lovers have created a religion of love to which they are more faithful than the Christian religion. This religion completely envelopes the couple. It is all that they live for, and it is what they ultimately die for. They are still faithfully religious people, even if it is not to Christianity, which may have put them in a better light in the audience's mind. If they are not Christian, then they do not have the same rules and restrictions regarding suicide and the afterlife as the audience had. This way, while the audience may have disapproved of the couple's actions, they would not have left the theatre with a terrible image of them in Hell, as noted by Budra (43). Shakespeare creates the religion of love for Romeo and Juliet, so that although they committed a blasphemous act, they may remain virtuous.

The other purpose of the religious imagery in Romeo and Juliet is to highlight the purity of their love. Religious devotion can be the most pure, unwavering, spiritual feeling in the world. By using words like saint, pilgrim, holy, and shrine, to describe their love, Shakespeare, via Romeo, associates it with this pure spiritual feeling. This assures the audience of how virtuous the couple's love is. However, Romeo was not the first to describe love as a holy experience. In the Study Guide, Paul Budra notes that Romeo is a

parody of a young Petrarchan lover. Petrarch often used terms “ which describe amatory as religious devotion” (Shakespeare, 169). Romeo mimics this quality by describing the ladies he loves in religious metaphors, starting with Rosaline. He refers to her “ saint-seducing gold” (1. 1. 210) and in Scene Two he says “ the devout religion of mine eye” (1. 2. 91), which embellishes his conceit by saying that his adoration of a woman is similar to the worship of a divinity (Shakespeare, 169). That is to say, when Romeo loves a woman, he does not just love her, he worships her as he would a God. In this instance, he uses the word ‘ religion’ to mean “ strict fidelity or faithfulness,” which is how Romeo behaves when in love. Clearly, he has very pure feelings of love towards women. Upon their first meeting, Romeo says that his lips are “ blushing pilgrims” (1. 4. 208), showing the purity of his intent. He intends only to worship her with his kiss, not defile her in any way. When Juliet accepts his metaphors and calls him “ Good pilgrim” (1. 4. 210), she validates that he is worthy of a kiss. Throughout the sonnet there is much imagery between body (such as hand, palm, lips, kiss) and spirit (such as saints, pilgrim, sin, holy). These two entities often become intertwined. When Juliet says “ And palm to palm is holy palmers’ kiss” (1. 4. 213), she is using the meaning of palm as a part of the body, and palmer as a pilgrim returning from the holy land with a palm-branch. Here the body and the spirit, or sex and religion, respectively, become interchangeable. Romeo answers with “ Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?” (1. 4. 214), meaning, do not saints and pilgrims feel desire? He validates their desire to kiss by saying that holy figures feel these things also, further reinforcing the purity of their love. Romeo and Juliet teasingly exchange religious metaphors

for kissing. By the end of the sonnet, they have established that a kiss is a prayer (1. 4. 216-9), and therefore it is all right for them to kiss. Throughout this sonnet, the young lovers confuse and interlace their love with religion, to the point where it takes on a pure and holy quality, before the audience even knows what has happened. When speaking of his name in the garden, Romeo says " Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized" (2. 1. 94). One is baptized at birth, so the word carries connotations of being a baby, or being young and innocent. In addition, one is baptized to wash away one's sins. Romeo suggests that with Juliet's love, his sins are obliterated and he is as pure as a newborn child, again promoting that religious imagery makes their love pure. Since the days of Petrarch and courtly love poetry, love has been compared to a holy experience. Shakespeare elaborates on this theme with Romeo and Juliet, to substantiate the purity of their love.

Shakespeare's use of religious imagery in Romeo and Juliet has been discussed ever since it was written. By associating the young couple's love with religious terminology, Shakespeare makes the audience feel the purity of their love, which makes them all the more sympathetic as characters. The second purpose is to avoid the Christian belief that to commit suicide was to spend the afterlife in Hell, Romeo and Juliet avoid condemnation by essentially forsaking Christianity and creating a new religion with their own rules: the religion of Love.

Works Cited

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