

# [Renaissance literature – romeo and juliet assignment](https://assignbuster.com/renaissance-literature-romeo-and-juliet-assignment/)

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Renaissance Essay In what ways is ‘ the other’ explored in two of the plays studied in Semester 1? Shakespeare’s plays have always had a hard-hitting effect on their audiences as they are often used as a vehicle to explore fears or concerns of the time. In the two tragic plays, ‘ Romeo and Juliet’ and ‘ Anthony and Cleopatra’, Shakespeare uses mythology, issues of power and sexuality and in particular concentrates on the concept of ‘ the other’.

In this use of the term ‘ the other’ we are referring to foreign elements, people or objects not from or associated with mainstream society, and in the context of the essay, the mainstream society of England in Shakespeare’s era. ‘ Romeo and Juliet is set in Verona, so some of its cultural details might be a result of Shakespeare’s trying to make it seem different from the England he knew’ (http://www. shakespeare. org. uk/content/view/449/461/).

It is interesting to consider the above statement as both plays are set outside of England, which I believe is a deliberate ploy from Shakespeare to try and break the barriers of the concept of ‘ the other’, giving an insight into other cultures and other races’ of people. This may, however, be opposite from the truth, as Shakespeare may be intentionally removing his audience from the comfort zone of familiar surroundings and forcing them to embark on his story through a foreign land, or you could say making them tackle ‘ the other’ head on.

I believe removing the audience from their comfort zone would result in the dramatic effects of the play being intensified, and by doing this the taboo subject and fear of ‘ the other’ could be desensitised to the audience by its exposure in the play. ‘ Romeo and Juliet’ is profoundly opposed to authority both in the political sense and the literary sense’ (Smith, Peter . J, Penguin 1995, Social Shakespeare, pg128).

I find this to be true as the law, and what society deems the norm, is broken throughout the play, either intentionally or by accident. Intentional infringements of the law or breaking of social rules include the Montagues attending the Capulets party and in the opening scene when Sampson bites his thumb at the Montagues, ‘ I do bite my thumb, sir’ (Shakespeare. W, Romeo and Juliet, Act 1 Scene 1 L44). The play also reaffirms that heterosexual relations is the correct and natural way to live your life, as its portrayed as the norm.

We learn from the outset that society seems to be male dominated, as they refer to women in a derogatory manor ‘ and therefore women, being the weaker vessels’ and the males illustrate their sexual power ‘ I will be cruel with the maids, and cut off their heads’. Fate is a core theme throughout both ‘ Romeo and Juliet’ and ‘ Antony and Cleopatra’, with the law seemingly being broke due to fate and not the characters intent, for example the slaying of Tybalt by Romeo is an act that he did not wish to carry out but a series of unfortunate incidents forced his hand, ‘ O, I am fortune’s fool! (At3 Scene1 Line133). Fortune itself seems to take the part of a character, working against the rest of the plays protagonists. From the moment Romeo slays Tybalt, he knows that he has now become ‘ the other’, as he averts from being an integral part of the community to an outcast, regarded as an enemy of the state. The audience would have empathy for Romeo as being alienated from society would have been a major concern for people at the time, as they themselves had to abide by strict social rules, and if they didn’t comply, they would face the same fate as Romeo.

Romeo’s speech about loving the Capulets is not understood by any of the characters in the play but the audience is aware of its purpose, resulting in great irony when his attempts to build a relationship with Tybalt result in Tybalts anger, Mercutios death and ultimately Romeo’s exile. Its clear that Romeo had no intentions of breaking the law and was a victim of poor fortune, resulting in him still being viewed as a ‘ good guy’ even though he is an outlaw in the narrative and now ‘ the other’ to everyone, bar a few characters, in Verona.

The frightening concept of exile would heighten the dramatic effect of the play for its audience. Apart from Romeo and Juliet, who have viewed each other as individuals and have rejected following their families beliefs, the Montagues ands Capulets have a prejudice towards each other, viewing the opposing house as ‘ the other’. This results in tension and violence, spurned by a fear of the unknown as they fail to identify people as individuals and live by stereotypes of past conflicts, which in turn leads to the death of the plays protagonists.

Morals to the story? Get to know people ??? romeo and Juliet wer unaware that they wer from rival houses It’s important to consider that in Shakespeare’s day ‘ Italy was exotic, or ‘ other’ (Romeo and Juliet Handout pg. 2) enabling him to write a play with more colourful and vibrant characters with a more extravagant plot and still maintain a sense of realism as the popular belief of Italy was that it was ‘ a place of poetry, romance and sophistication; but also of violent passions, deadly feuds, treachery and sensational events’ (Romeo and Juliet Handout pg. 2).

The fact that Italy was regarded in this way enabled to plain to retain a sense of realism, as having these ‘ sensational’ events unfold in England would be hard for the audience to accept, due to the mundane Puritan ideology associated with England in the era. ‘ The other’ is an ideology that has been used in both ‘ Romeo and Juliet’ and ‘ Antony and Cleopatra’ to portray what is right and wrong, what conforms and what rejects the common ideology of society and the consequences of such behaviour. They are universal stories with strong political links, masquerading behind figurative narratives.

In the Renaissance period, Puritanism was an important religious and political ideology, and its influence on the play is evident as the controlling, plain and strict Romans are representative to the values of Puritan England. They disapproved of ‘ plays, dancing, singing, drinking and obvious fictions/stories/poetry, decorative language, extravagant dress, pictures and statues, and sensuous indulgence of all kinds'(Module Handbook pg 33), all of which were deemed wrong, and people not abiding by these ideals became ‘ the other’.

The play can be seen as a protest by Shakespeare as he creates this amazingly colourful and elaborate play that explores, glorifies and celebrates the seductive otherness in the plot, but as a result goes against the values of his homeland, and goes against the monarchy. ‘ Antony and Cleopatra’ has been composed by an author who has no first hand experience of life in Rome or Egypt and is largely responsible for imposing and confirming stereotypes at the time. Shakespeare has used the locations of Rome and Egypt as a canvas to elaborately portray the events, and political ideologies in his homeland.

James 1st has similar traits to that of Antony, as although he is the ruling monarchy, he goes against the very ideals he expects his people to stick to. Shakespeare uses the characters and plot to expose the events of James the 1st court as its been described as ‘ expensive and elaborate, baroque and ritualistic, symbolised that power and majesty, and the king’s physical place as the focal point of the entertainment’ (http://www. luminarium. org/sevenlit/james/jamesbio. htm ) , which indicates that he neglects to follow and conform like the masses to the puritan way of life.

This is mirrored in Antony, as he is seduced by the exotic otherness represented in his love fascination, Cleopatra, and the way of life she can offer him. James 1st wanted to identify himself in the role of Ceasar, the powerful dominating respected leader, but evidence suggests this is far from how Shakespeare viewed him. The tragedy of ‘ Antony and Cleopatra’ explores the clash between expression and restraint. Egypt is an exotic land of riches represented by Cleopatra who is often referred to as simply ‘ Egypt’, as the characters in the play identify her as an encapsulation of the ideologies of the country.

Rome, on the other hand, follows a more plain and strict way of life that Antony neglects in favour of the rich lavish lifestyle of Egypt. Rome is stable, powerful and well grounded on puritan morality, represented by the big towering buildings that you would associate with this society. Egypt is epitomised by the striking imagery incurred by its main feature, the river Nile, that free and natural, constantly flowing, under no restraints, similar to the lifestyle you would expect to find in this land.

Antony is seduced buy the exotic sexual ‘ otherness’ of Cleopatra and the country she inhabits, with Shakespeare using decorative language to illustrate the seduction through Enobarbus’ description of her. He turns her into a mystical goddess through his figurative description of her, ‘ The silken tackle swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands…'(A2 S2 L216) He also refers to her as being like a mermaid, ‘ mermaids, tended her i’th’eyes, and made their bends adorning.

At the helm a seeming mermaid steers’, a mythological reference that may be an elaborate way of hinting to the outcome of the play, as like the myths suggest, the mermaid sings to the sailor who ends up crashing on the rocks – similar to the fate of Antony. She seduces him by overcoming him with senses – ‘ strange invisible perfume’, ‘ touches of those flower-soft hands’, ‘ tune of flutes’ and her sexual royal appearance with ‘ cloth-of-gold of tissue'(Antony & Cleopatra, act 2 scene 2 L205/215).

Her attire is similar to that of a Goddess, a deliberate ploy in the art of seduction in her quest for Antonys affections, as she represents power and beauty, a very attractive prospect for Antony. Antony slowly loses power throughout the play as his love for Cleopatra weakens his defences and she gains control and power over him, epitomised in Act 2 Scene 2 as Enobarbus reveals that when Antony invites her for supper ‘ she replied it should be better he became her guest'(A2 S2 L225).

We see a change in Antony as he spends more and more time with Cleopatra…. This has a devastating effect as he loses sight of his duties and the politics of Rome in favour of leading a more lavish life after being seduced by ‘ the other’ in the form of Cleopatra and the Egyptian ideology. This type of female manipulation can also be seen in ‘ Macbeth’, although Cleopatra is more subtle in her ploy to get her own way, as opposed to Lady Macbeth who makes it clear to all what she wants.