A COMPARITIVE EXAMINATION OF SHAKESPEARE'S POPULAR PLAYS

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When asking a typical theatre student of the twenty-first century about their knowledge of William Shakespeare, they would answer by referring to some of his plays. The common titles *Hamlet, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet* and even *A Midsummer Night's Dream* would repeatedly occur as a response to identifying play titles associated with Shakespeare's name. Yet, when asking students if they are familiar with his other thirty-four plays, they would be surprised to hear he wrote that many plays. A survey conducted in the English town of Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire over the summer of 2010 asked many local shoppers to associate play titles to Shakespeare's authorship. The play *Hamlet* was the most recognized in regards to William Shakespeare. However, when asked to identify *Pericles, Cymbeline* and *Titus Andronicus*, there was a silent response before the awareness was raised that it was also Shakespeare who wrote them.

Therefore one has to question the overall popularity of some of Shakespeare's plays against those that are not as clearly recognized. Some could argue that a modern audience member can associate more with the relevance of one play over another. Others could suggest that the initial critical acclaim of the Elizabethan Era gave certain Shakespeare plays a head-start in seeking their popularity, while simultaneously destroying the search for recognition in another.

While a modern critic may consider some of his plays more favourable than another, a second critic may disagree. This study seeks to examine the possible reasoning
behind the very apparent popularity of two of his recognizable works against two of his less favored texts, using the twenty-first century theatre audiences as the subject.

On 24 June 2010, a local survey was conducted to examine the order of popularity of Shakespeare’s plays. The survey asked twenty-five people to rank the work of Shakespeare they found the most and least recognizable. From the results, it was clear that *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* were the most popular texts (with *Hamlet* following closely behind) and *A Comedy of Errors* and *Anthony and Cleopatra* among the plays that were least recognized. Based on these results, an analysis of the differences between *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *A Comedy of Errors*, alongside *Romeo and Juliet* and *Anthony and Cleopatra* will be conducted. Within each study there will be a cross-examination of the plays’ plot, character and contemporary transformations and performances. Additionally, there will be a brief comparison of the productions of the twenty-first century, including any re-translations or musical adaptations.

From the initial performance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in 1594, Elizabethan critics were quick to praise its success as a comedy. John Dryden, respected theatre critic of the period stated that “the production was so immensely popular, that it was staged in two different performance venues at the same time” (Rozakis 54). Skiles Howard, co-author and editor of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream: Texts and Contexts* states that “generations of audiences are captivated by the play’s eclectic mingling of lovers, fairies, and artisan actors in an action filled with mythological allusions and moved by the power of love, magic and self-conscious theatricality” (Howard 1).
An initial insight into the play’s early popularity stems from the traditions of the Elizabethan festivals that were common at the time of writing. Shakespeare constructed his play based on the notable celebrations that were regularly held. The popular holiday of Midsummer’s eve invited members of the working class to join in seasonal festivities, originating throughout Europe. Specific festivals included the popular holidays of May Day and Midsummer’s Eve, which were used to help celebrate and proclaim a season of warm weather, fertility and good health. In practice, these holidays were celebrated by processions of huge spectacle, including musicians, Morris dancers and followed by short performances. During the day, people were seen “returning to the woods to gather branches of sycamore to trim doorways, churches and streets” (Howard 92). The elite ceremonies were another source of celebration and were commonly populated by the upper-class members of society. These would commonly occur after royal marriages and contain plays performed by working class folk such as craftsmen, joiners, weavers and woodsmen.

Shakespeare used the foundation of such celebrations to popularize his text. Skiles Howard comments that “the action of the play is propelled by the two celebrations . . . as each was a significant occasion for Shakespeare’s audience” (Howard 89). One can instantly draw parallels to the text of the play from the depth of celebrations. As was common throughout Shakespeare’s career, plays were staged in front of the royal family to please and entertain. The same scenario is captured in the final act of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as the mechanicals stage a play for newly-married Theseus and Hippolyta. Similarly, Lysander and Hermia’s escape to the woods in an attempt to spend time
together and escape the laws of marriage. This links directly to the Midsummer tradition with the gathering branches by venturing into the woods.

The play itself explores the misadventures and mishaps of three different groups in their search to reach their personal goals. The royalty members are desperate to resolve issues of courtship and love. Lysander is determined to show his willingness and commitment for Hermia’s hand in marriage, while Demetrius seeks the same hand, but having her father’s approval on his side. However, Helena feels constant attraction for Demetrius, and finds different ways to impress him.

Meanwhile, a group of actors (known as mechanicals) are running out of time to stage their latest production in front of the royalty. Their misadventures occur when Oberon and Puck, the spirits of the forest, use magic to transpose Nick Bottom into an ass. The same power is used to manipulate the love affair between the lovers, but initially on the wrong person. The end result is both Lysander and Demetrius desiring affection for Helena, with a strong sense of neglect for Hermia. Lysander makes his new found love so apparent, that he rejects Hermia with the insult “[You] minimus of hindering knot grass made. [You] bead, [You] acorn!” (Howard 58).

The play concludes with a charming ending, with Lysander and Demetrius disenchanted and happily marrying Hermia and Helena respectively. The mechanicals too find happiness with their successful (albeit rather whimsical) production of the rehearsed play before the royal court of Athens.

When summarizing the play, the plot comes across as highly elaborate and complicated. Yet Shakespeare found a way to cunningly connect each of the three major
plot lines and generate a successful comedy. Thus, the play becomes accessible to a variety of themes by exposing elements of the supernatural and the treatment of the class division as well as exposing the nature of the typical midsummer tradition.

Shakespeare’s use of magic within his plays did not become prominent until the production of this text. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* arguably houses the most significant and comical use of the supernatural. Shakespeare crafted a delicate and beautiful object to play a powerful part in the corruption of true love; a flower. By crafting such a natural part of the environment to become the most supernatural strength of the play, becomes highly ironic and suggests a mystical nature to any wooded area with such beautiful flowers. This would have excited a belief of the mysterious nature of the woodlands and would have roused a true debate within the Elizabethan audience about the mysticism within their forests.

Magic not only had a strong selling point to the Elizabethan audiences, but its mystical nature is still used to excite audiences today. While there is a clear difference in stage spectacle, it can be argued that the continued success of this production is a result of the inclusion of the supernatural within the production. It provides the perfect solution for manipulating unexpected situations and audiences of the modern era are always excited to see intriguing situational comedies. With Shakespeare attached to the project, the play becomes ideal in providing an exciting connection of plot lines and an inclusion of magic to heighten the level of enjoyment.

The idea of class division began to develop in Elizabethan England with the vast development of capitalism and privately-owned businesses. Shakespeare crafted a three-
tiered class system within his play through the creation of the Athenian royals, the lovers and the mechanicals. To add another dimension to the class system, Oberon and Puck, as the mystic characters of the play, display a very structured relationship, with Puck constantly serving Oberon. The development of the class system would have been apparent to Elizabethan audiences and fully appreciated especially by the royalty.

When examining more specifically the characterization within the text, it can easily be said that the manipulation of Puck becomes the main action that drives all three scenarios. The mischievous fairy not only creates an obstacle for the actors (in transposing Nick Bottom into an ass), but also adds an unexpected obstacle for the lovers. Oberon’s goal in the play is to seek revenge on his cunning wife Titania, queen of the Fairies. Her possession of an Indian prince sparks a jealous rage in Oberon that arguably sets the story in motion, giving him the motivation to instruct Puck’s mischief. Oberon’s lengthy monologue in Act 2, Sc I suggests not only the elaborate nature of his jealousy, but also the sophistication of his plan.

OBERON: “Yet marked I where the bolt of Cupid fell. It fell upon a little western flower, Before milk-white, now purple with love’s wound. And maidens call it “love-in-idleness.” Fetch me that flower. The herb I showed thee once. The juice of it on sleeping eyelids laid Will make or man or woman madly dote Upon the next live creature that it sees.” (Greenwald 491)

In this moment, Oberon discusses the strength of the potential to manipulate love, using mythological characters such as Cupid to demonstrate the importance of
supernatural powers. Thus, the inclusion of a mystical creature planting the seeds for a situational comedy would have intrigued and fascinated the audience of the Elizabethan era. The idea of the magical and mystical at the time of writing was one that certainly was appreciated and the inclusion of stage spectacle would have heightened the level of enjoyment. Through the development of the supernatural ideals, many spectators, and even the royalty, found their imaginations at its peak.

What makes this play more accessible is the ability to transpose the action and displace it to demonstrate social relevance. To date, many theatre practitioners have sought to create their own unique version of the play and continue to gain recognition. Thus, the success of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has become very significant through the last six-hundred years of production. During this time, the play has been performed over seven thousand times and recreated by many respected theatrical practitioners. (Alchin 2005)

David Garrick worked on a production in 1763 with George Colemen that incorporated new lines and musical interjection. During this time in theatrical history, musical performances were beginning to emerge as the prominent form of production, with operetta and ballads taking shape. Thus, Garrick used the popular growth of musical production to his advantage and intertwined Shakespeare’s text with musical numbers.

In 1971, Peter Brook used the play text to represent his new presentational style of theatre, incorporating bare set pieces and having actors use trapezes. Considered by Clive Barnes, theatre critic, as a “historic staging of dream” (Barnes 1), the production was “approached with a radiant innocence. [Brook] had forgotten gossamer fairies
sequined eyelids and gauzy veils and sees the play for what it is— an allegory of sensual love” (Barnes 1). Notably, Brook transformed characters Puck and Oberon and made them into acrobats and jugglers. This work alone shows audiences how open the text becomes for many displacements and adaptations.

Therefore, it is fair to say that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* will continue to remain a successful Shakespearean text and even more practitioners will use it as a way of expressing their own theatrical ideals. The text continues to be made into several television and cinematic transformations, as well as staged productions. Most recently, the BBC in London devised a television show titled *Shakespeare Retold* and used modern ideals to explore the text. Similarly, the 1999 movie version of the play is still highly accredited and stars popular performers such as Christian Bale and Rupert Everett.

In comparison, Shakespeare’s first comedy, *The Comedy of Errors* did not rank as highly. While some can still appreciate the nature of the text and the characters, many theatre practitioners do not consider his first comedy in the same league as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The story itself is a borrowed tale from the Roman playwright Plautus’ play *The Menaechmi*. One could immediately assume therefore that a play taken from a text of Roman success would become a hit. Even Francis Meres, renowned Elizabethan critic, mentions how Shakespeare is “accounted the best for comedy among the English as Plautus was among the Latins” (Miola 3). Other scholars however have argued that Shakespeare borrows too much from Plautus’ original play and, although making social relevance for an Elizabethan audience, does not add his own unique style that makes his other comedies more successful. William Warner, literary critic and dramatist, believes
that “The play is purely founded on Plautus and his *Menaechimi*. If it be not a translation, it is at least a paraphrase” (Miola 4).

The play, while speaking more about characters, tells of mistaken identity on two different levels. Egeon, the father of the story opens the play with his tale of a terrible shipwreck that separated his wife and twin sons at a tender age. Egeon travels to Ephesus in a quest to find his other son and his man servant Dromio. What follows is a collection of scenarios of false accusations and mistaken identity, since the twin sons are currently in the same town. The twin sons are identical in nature, as well as their Dromios’, adding a second layer to the dimension of mistaken identity.

While the central protagonists, the Antipholi’s are mistaken in a stream of situations involving the other person’s lover/wife, so too are their man servants, who become wrapped up in each other’s personal affairs. The action is heightened with the inclusion of an expensive chain that is given to one Antipholi and with payment that is later expected from the other. The resolution, albeit slightly predictable, is the discovery of the two sets of twins, exposed by father Aegeon and their much needed encounter.

While the story bears many similarities to Plautus’ Latin version, Shakespeare does include another set of twins to heighten the action.

From the nature of Shakespeare’s translation, many scholars have gone on to study his ability to translate Latin. (While scholars criticize his literary genius, subsequent work shows his skills as a translator, others argue that his translation of his particular play expose how Shakespeare’s original pieces are far stronger than his adaptations.) Charles Gildon, noted as one of the first Shakespearean critics with his
authorship of the first extended critical commentary, believed that “this comedy is undeniable proof that Shakespeare was not so ignorant in the Latin tongue as some would fain make him...Shakespeare did understand Latin enough to read Plautus and knew him well enough to form a design for his work” (Miola 4). Initial criticism was therefore favorable. Later critics however, such as John Dennis believed that “the play is a lost translation of manuscript, altered perhaps by the assistance of a learned friend” (Dennis 5).

Therefore, in regards to initial popularity, Elizabethan and twenty-first century audiences may be slightly dissuaded in seeing the play. Not only does the Latin translation become highly questionable, but this in turn makes Shakespeare’s own creation and adaptation up for debate. Audiences become slightly untrustworthy of his text and consequently do not rank it as highly as his later works. What makes this argument more interesting is that fact that, even today Shakespeare’s authorship of this particular piece is up for debate. The date of publication is still uncertain, with Gildon arguing 1585 over 1595 and the publication of another translation by William Warner (1558-1609), English poet and translator, the play’s exposure in the literary whelm becomes heavily clouded by controversy. Some could argue that would spark a popular intrigue, yet Elizabethans wanted honesty and unique ownership attached to the plays of the time.

The first signs of weakness in the storyline of this play are the lack of social relevance at the time of performance. Taking into account that this was one of Shakespeare’s first comedies, the plot does not speak specifically to anyone in the Elizabethan Era. Arguably, Shakespeare’s plays that were written for the royal family
became those of notable success, since they were greatly appreciated. James I for example was known for applauding the success of Macbeth and how it displayed the downfall of a corrupt king. Yet the story of The Comedy of Errors borrows the idea merely from the Roman play. Although Shakespeare adds another dimension, in the creation of another set of twins, the play has no real message that speaks to the audience.

G.R. Elliott, writer of the article Weirdness in The Comedy of Errors states that “critics have regarded the piece as uninspired because of its comparatively conventional style” (Miola 58). Not only does the story not relate to its audience, but the style becomes one to cause confusion and complication.

When examining the characters in the text, one has to take into account the connection to the play, in regards to seeking out the lack of its popularity. Although Robert S. Miola, critical author of The Play and the Critics: The Comedy of Errors believes that “in this play, we find more intricacy of plot than distinction of character” (Miola 5), there is still much to be said about the characters who speak out in the play. Shakespeare crafts each figure to display a specific personality trait with a clear goal and objective. Some clear examples are the Courtesan, with her stereotypical looks and seductive personality, and Angelo, the goldsmith with clear business intentions in mind. These character types refer back to the popular Italian theatrical form of commedia dell’arte, which exposes stock characters in common situations. Arguably, it is this notion that Shakespeare borrows for his play, since the characters become the driving force over the plot.
Audiences from both the Elizabethan era and the twenty-first century may be confused by the fact that the play opens with a three-minute speech from Egeon. The character speaks from the heart, and his lines evoke sympathy from the audience:

EGEON: For, ere the ships could meet by twice five leagues, we were encountered by a mighty rock, which being violently borne upon, Our helpful ship was splitted in the midst; So that, in this unjust divorce of us, fortune had left to both of us alike, what to delight in, what to sorrow for. (Crowther 2011)

In this moment, Egeon speaks of the terrible disaster at sea, where the boat carrying his wife and children was split in half by a mighty rock. Yet, on the positive outlook, his wife and Egeon were left with one son and one manservant. Initially, the lack of comedic moments from the outset may come as a surprise to those expecting a comedy. Egeon’s character is far from hilarious as he provides the exposition to set the mood for the play. One would question therefore if this was a good way to open a comedy. G.R. Elliott comments on this particular opening, saying that “the opening scene, from the standpoint of the play’s whole mood, is not well tempered. Relatively too much stress is placed on the pathos of the romance, and too little on its weirdness” (Elliott 61).

There are elements of other characters that not only provide the comical interjections, but rather create religious significance, which may have inspired the Elizabethan audience for this production. Adriana, the wife of Antipholus of Ephesus makes speeches that become “echoes of Psalm 8 and Ephesians 5” (Miola 11). Similarly,
the character of Balthazar makes speeches that demonstrate the fact that “a respect for
decency and the opinion of the world become an excellence of bulwark to our virtues”
(Griffith, 141). Yet Shakespeare fails to make the inclusion of religious elements of
strong part of his play, placing most of the focus on the activity of false accusations. This
arguably may have left audiences confused about Shakespeare’s fundamental focus on
this play. Was he striving to entertain, or was he providing underlying messages of
religion and moral understandings?

While the play has still been produced in a variety of venues through the
centuries, many theatre venues of the modern era seek to entertain a broad market.
Shakespeare’s popular plays in this argument contain more elements of spectacle that
would have appealed to the younger ages. Clifford Williams staged a production of the
text in Stratford in 1962, making alterations to the text and character intentions. As noted
by Robert Speaight, critical writer, “Mr. Williams used the convention of commedia
dell’arte to much effect without overdoing it. However, the costumes were lacking in
color and fantasy, the incidental music marked appropriately the progress of the story.”
(Speaight 486).

More recently, the Regent’s Open Air Theatre in London produced the play. In
response to its 2010 debut, theatre critic Maxwell Cooter commented on the lack of
comedic-driven moments. The production, which displaced the story to a 1940s beach
town in England, was certainly a unique retelling. He commented that “if there had been
more attention paid to drawing out the best of the comedy, the production could have
been dazzling” (Cooter 17). It is therefore interesting to note that, even for a twenty-first
century audience, Shakespeare’s focus on the stock characters becomes very overwhelming.

However, there are some similarities between *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Comedy of Errors*, and one has to question what separates the popularity in this instance. Both play’s have a structure that speaks of a plot and sub-plot that find each other interconnecting at some point in the play. The characters interact within ridiculous dilemmas that would not be considered normal in both Elizabethan and modern audiences. And more importantly, the characters from both plays are non-existent or non-sensical in the real world, yet they speak to the audience from a comical level.

Although *The Comedy of Errors* has been staged fewer times than its competitor, the text has still been adapted within the twenty-first century and is still performed today. The most recognized transformation of the text comes from Rogers and Hart’s musical adaptation titled *The Boys of Syracuse*.

Since Shakespeare’s comedies have had varied success for both the Elizabethan patrons and the modern theatre-goers, it is arguably his tragedies that lay the foundation for his success as a playwright. Shakespeare’s tragedies to date go down in history as his most successful work, since a majority of his popular plays (e.g. *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Othello*) are of this nature. The second comparative study comes from examining his most popular romantic tragedy against one that is still considered enjoyable, yet not as popular as its competitor.

*Romeo and Juliet* is recognized by many as the most relatable play of the twenty-first century. With a number of theatre productions, musical adaptations and even movie
versions of the story, the play has been one that is globally recognized. Not only does the play itself speak to audiences on many levels, but even specific lines and scenes are recognized by those who do not even study Shakespeare. As a comical antidote, Juliet’s Line “Wherefore Art Thou Romeo” is one of Shakespeare’s lines that has been the most mistranslated. (It means Why are you and not where are you.)

The play’s competitor for this analysis is Antony and Cleopatra. While many critics would argue that this play is just as popular as Romeo and Juliet, one would easily recognize the plot structure and leading figures such as Friar Lawrence and Tybalt, against characters like Lepidus and Octavius. What makes this study particularly fascinating is the fact that Antony and Cleopatra becomes a direct historical allegory on Roman politics and affairs, whereas Romeo and Juliet is entirely fictional. One would expect plays that speak about historical moments in history to be far more popular, especially for an educational institution, since the attitudes of the Roman emperors speak much more to audiences than a fictional tale of young lovers. Yet, the twenty-first century audience begs to differ, as Romeo and Juliet has been produced many more times than Antony and Cleopatra.

Romeo and Juliet tells the story of the continued fights between two rival households, namely the Montagues and the Capulets. Their feud is marked with constant aggression that becomes disruptive in the streets of Verona. Young Romeo, member of the Montague household, stays passive from the outset and reluctantly goes in disguise to a party hosted by the family enemies. Here, he meets and instantly falls in love with Juliet, the young daughter of the Capulet family. Their affair becomes one of secrecy, until Juliet becomes betrothed to be married. As Romeo becomes banished for disturbing
the peace (killing Tybalt, a Capulet who killed his best friend), he begs for a plan to live happily with Juliet away from Verona. With the help of a Friar, Juliet constructs a scene that fakes her own death. Yet Romeo fails to hear of this plan and, thinking that she is dead, takes his own life, as she wakes from the eternal sleep. Seeing Romeo’s body, she stabs herself and the pair lie dead in the Capulet tomb.

Unlike many of Shakespeare’s play, Romeo and Juliet opens with a prologue that reveals the play’s ending. The line “A pair of Star-cross’d Lovers take their life,” becomes immediately striking for the audiences, with them wanting to know how it happened. This element of intrigue would have certainly sparked a unique interest for the audiences, wanting them to see how the action unfolds. The idea of finding friends within enemies is also an original concept, cunningly crafted by Shakespeare. This unique idea further heightens the interest of the audience, as the affair of the lovers becomes engaging and suspenseful.

Mark Van Doren, Shakespearean scholar believes that “Shakespeare has written at last a tragedy which is crowded with life and at the same time with cleverness” (Van Doren 3). Thus, the play’s overall plot speaks not only to an Elizabethan audience, but sustains its relevance in the twenty-first century. Many educational establishments choose to study this text because of its examination of lovers battling against family desires. While the concept of rival family may only be prominent in some instances in the twenty-first century, the idea of distanced love speaks to many on a variety of levels. Audiences immediately connect with the story since they feel empathy for the struggle of Romeo and Juliet.
The common themes apparent in the text are divided love, and family rivalry. Initially selling themselves as simple thematic ideas, Shakespeare found a way to interweave these and craft situations that spark the greatest intrigue. Their first meeting becomes admirable to many, since Shakespeare works with the common idea of love at first sight. Notably, he does not set up any formal introduction or sequence of meetings, yet creates a rapid love struck moment and their love is partnered within seconds. While some could argue a lack of truth in this moment, audiences are captivated and entranced by their affection and the poetic dialogue that Shakespeare crafts during their first meeting. Critics may also question other events or character choices that occur during the play to be of curious choice. M.M. Mahood, author of Shakespeare’s Wordplay comments on how “Shakespeare leaves us with no explanation of why Romeo did not put Juliet on his horse and make for Mantua” (Mahood 56). However, audiences become aware that Shakespeare is not looking for an easy exit for his characters, but is absorbed with their tragedy and the power of their love becoming their demise. Ultimately, Shakespeare wants them to live tragically together, rather than dying apart.

When it comes to examination of language, Shakespeare’s expertise is apparent. His intentional use of the literal depiction, combined with a metaphorical undertone, provides striking meaning in the following situation which tells of the young lovers’ first meeting:

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.

ROMEO: O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do. They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

JULIET: Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

ROMEO: Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take. *(They kiss)*

*(Crowther, 2011)*

Their first encounter shows innocence, loyalty and includes many religious connotations. There is a depth to the language as well as full intentions of undying love that exposes Shakespeare's genius and gives evidence to the success of the text. Shakespeare cunningly crafted the language in this instance to display a number of emotional levels and metaphorical meanings.

Other passages in the play are considered by many as strokes of literary genius and are still used in study today. D.A. Traversi, writer of *An Approach to Shakespeare* cites Mercutio's Queen Mab speech as "a brilliant exercise in poetic brauva, of the type to which Shakespeare, in the first flush of his creative powers, was especially attracted" *(Traversi 16)*. Friar Lawrence too has some great speeches. His character stands prominent as the religious spearhead and the greatest ally to Romeo and Juliet's love affair. In his opening monologue, he discusses the importance of beauty and nature and how the slightest poison can cause corruption:

FRIAR LAWRENCE: Within the infant rind of this small flower, poison hath residence and medicine power: For this, being smelt, with that part cheers each part; Being tasted, slays all senses with the heart. *(Crowther, 2011)*
Shakespeare’s cunningness with language becomes apparent in examples like this. The discussion of the slightest corruption of nature suggests the slightest problem causing strong consequences. One can argue that this becomes foreshadowing to the events that occur later on in the play, when Romeo fails to receive the note for Juliet’s faked death.

Noting the creation of this text to be later on in his career, M.M. Mahood comments on the play’s “proleptic second and third meaning to serve to sharpen the play’s dramatic irony” (Mahood 55) He believes the depth of language helps audience members question the intent of the piece, and to question the notion of life. “Does death choose the lovers or do they elect to die? Is the play a tragedy of character or of fate?” (Mahood 56).

One must certainly appreciate the depth of characterization in this play. Shakespeare includes a diverse range of figures; the noble leaders of the households, the aggressive members of each household (e.g. Tybalt vs. Benvolio), the righteous figures, such as Friar Lawrence and County Paris and the comical characters, including Juliet’s Nurse. While the nurse is considered by many scholars as the comical interlude to the play, others believe her role to have vital importance. Brenda Bruce, writer of Nurse in Romeo and Juliet believes that “she holds a very important position with an important family in Verona . . . she is the Italian equivalent of a bright Cockney with all the same energetic vulgarity and warmth” (Bruce 187). The general rule in Shakespeare’s plays is to consider the importance of the messenger. The Nurse becomes the informant in Act 2, sc 4 bringing news to Juliet and also in Act 3, sc 2 when telling Juliet of Tybalt’s death.
The modern appeal of the text is vast. It is obvious to many from the recreation of productions that the text serves relevance in the twenty-first century. *Romeo and Juliet* has been transposed in a variety of capacities. Not only has the play been reproduced over 500 times by professional theatre companies around the world, but the story has also been recreated into a popular musical. *West Side Story* (by Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim) speaks of two members from rival gangs falling in love, with tragic consequences. The plot mimics exactly that of *Romeo and Juliet*, yet uses the outset of gang rivalry in 1950s New York as the subject. Robert Hapgood, author of *West Side Story and the Modern Appeal of Romeo and Juliet* comments that “another salient feature of Romeo and Juliet that West Side Story capitalizes upon is its youthfulness, not only in its subject of young love but in its manner of presentation” (Hapgood 234). The characters are not necessarily direct representations of those from the original text, but are new figures that help tell the same story and deliver a similar message.

The text has also been made into many different movie versions, two of which are highly recognizable today. Franco Zeffirelli’s 1968 film version of the play became critically acclaimed as the first successful adaptation. It exposed the true nature of the story, mimicking the action and words of the text and using the same scenic locations. Recognizable actor Lawrence Olivier became attached to the project as the narrator. He admitted his strong appreciation of Zeffirelli’s previous theatrical work at the National Theatre in London and was compelled to be part of the film. The film’s success was noted by its $31,000,000 intake at the box office.

In 1996, Baz Luhrmann created *R + J*, a contemporary translation of the text, using modern Verona Beach gang rivalry and guns instead of swords. The film still used
Shakespearean language, but connected the action to a twenty-first century setting.

Starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes in the lead roles, the film created the backdrop of a hip Verona that could be seen as relatable to younger, perhaps more rebellious audiences. Film critic James Berardinelli states that "Luhrmann hasn't fashioned this motion picture with the stodgy, elitist Shakespeare "purist" in mind. Instead, he has taken aim at an audience that would normally regard Shakespeare as a chore to be endured in school, not a passionate drama to ignite the screen" (Berardinelli 5).

Luhrmann cunningly transforms many of the iconic scenes from the original text to places such as a glamorous rich mansion, a deserted beach stage and dilapidated pool halls. In particular, a vibrant green house serves as Friar Lawrence's cell. This becomes an unexpected yet intriguing transformation in this instance as it conveys a different notion to Friar Lawrence's character unlike the one crafted in Shakespeare's text.

To extend Romeo and Juliet's twenty-first century success, a 2011 computer generated film has recently been created that uses garden gnomes to tell the same story. This becomes a fantastic adaptation for younger audiences as the digital animation excites and amuses, as well as telling the familiar text. The film is cleverly titled Gnomeo and Juliet and tells of a rivalry between two sets of neighboring garden trolls (namely "The Reds" and "The Blues"). The film, adapted and directed by Kelly Asbury uses the traditional story as told by Shakespeare, yet transforms some of the characters to become a delightful and entertaining piece for young children. In an interview and press release, Asbury states that "the film honors William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and will hopefully introduce the story to a younger generation who might not know much about it" (Asbury 11). The only significant change to this adaptation is the shift in mood of the
tragic third act. Rather than sticking to the original, Ashbury has the lead characters meet a statue of William Shakespeare who serves as an oracle in the adaptation. He tells them their future could be dangerous unless they change their attitudes to the family rivalry. This was mainly to keep the piece on a light-hearted plane and avoid morbid death scenes for younger audiences.

While some scholars may argue that the play’s popularity only stands because of the variety of different television and film interpretations, others regard its appeal as “a form of critical appreciation of the original, its emphasis and omissions, successes and failures serving to sharpen our awareness of the original and its modern appeal” (Hapgood 229). The text of *Romeo and Juliet* served as the foundation for these adaptations and it was left to the writers and producer to construct their own action around it. The new characters are regarded as a response to the original and this too becomes an instrument for critical thought. In *West Side Story*, Friar Lawrence shows qualities similar to Doc, the concerned druggist. Similarly, Chino demonstrates characteristics of Paris, the noble and worthy suitor. Thus, audience members can certainly appreciate the popularity of Shakespeare’s text and how it is successfully transposed into modern adaptations, such as musical and movies.

In short, *Romeo and Juliet* becomes a unique selling point to audiences across the globe. Susan Snyder, critical scholar believes that “the play is different from Shakespeare’s other tragedies in that it becomes, rather than is, tragic” (Snyder 73). She also believes that the text creates many comedic moments that help lighten the mood on many occasions, thus making its ultimate tragic ending very unexpected. What becomes more intriguing is that in tragic plays with comical undertones, the importance of the law
is enforced throughout. In comedies such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Comedy of Errors*, tragic issues become easily brushed aside in the pursuit of happiness. Yet, Romeo and Juliet become overly concerned with obeying the law, which sets in motion their failed plan for happiness.

The play *Antony and Cleopatra* on the other hand, has had fewer adaptations and modern transformations. The text alone has been regarded by many critics as not in the same realm as *Romeo and Juliet*. This becomes interesting initially, since both texts have striking similarities. The most obvious being the truth of a struggled love affair between people with different backgrounds. While Anthony’s heritage lies in the Roman Empire, Cleopatra has background with the Egyptian Royal family, serving as the country’s queen. Both texts also stress an arranged marriage that is far from desired. In this text however, it is the male part of the love affair Anthony who is betroved to marry Octavia, Caesar’s sister.

As mentioned previously, critics argue that it is the initial and ongoing criticism of the play that can craft its popularity throughout the centuries and ultimately carry a strong reputation into the modern day era. This play, more so than many others in Shakespeare’s canon, has received a vast amount of mixed reviews, ranging from Samuel Taylor Coleridge praises to A.C. Bradley’s vicious critique. Coleridge, writing between 1813-1834 “extols Antony and Cleopatra as the most wonderful of Shakespeare’s plays” (Deats 1). Bradley, writing around 1906, faults the catastrophe as “failing to evoke the requisite pity and terror” (Deats 1.) Even twentieth century writers such as Bertolt Brecht and George Bernard Shaw have contrasting views. While Brecht praises the text as “a splendid, gripping drama” (Deats 1), Bernard Shaw condemns it, saying that the play is
merely “a study of infatuation, a theme he deems more appropriate to comedy than tragedy” (Deats 1).

While the text has numerous similarities, there are also some significant differences which arguably create its lack of success in comparison to its competitor. Critics could argue that it is ultimately the historical connections that the text generates that makes it less appealing to a modern audience. Modern theatre practitioners especially want to add their own creation to a fictional text and do not feel at liberty to do so with Antony and Cleopatra, because of its important historical ties. Ultimately, one cannot fabricate history in order to speak an entirely different message, and that could happen if one was to displace the text into a modern setting.

The story deals with Mark Anthony’s love and affection for Cleopatra. On hearing the news of an attack of the Roman Empire and his wife’s death, Antony is compelled to return to Rome to help fortify the kingdom. During his absence, Caesar and the other members of the triumvirate feel overly concerned about Antony’s lack of service and duty. On his return, he argues with Caesar yet agrees to make peace by agreeing to marry his sister. Yet Cleopatra catches the news and becomes insane with jealousy. However the significance of the story comes from Caesar’s later betrayal and command of power. Antony and Caesar become divided again, yet Caesar turns his army towards Egypt. The battle is won by Antony, yet an internal battle takes the lives of the characters. Cleopatra is poisoned by snakes and Antony falls on his own sword.

What makes this story slightly more engaging are the characters sense of loyalty. The play opens with Antony expressing his adoration for Cleopatra, yet towards the end
he is determined to kill her over suspicions of her betrayal. Unlike Romeo and Juliet, their love is not entirely wholesome. This becomes a strong argument therefore for its lack of popularity against it’s competitor since Romeo and Juliet displayed constant affection for each other throughout the play. To develop this idea, the passages of love and romance in this text are not as passionate as the ones spoken in its competitor. To many scholars, Antony and Cleopatra speaks more about the battle between empires, than it does about the love between the two lead characters. This could be another convincing argument towards the favorability of the other play.

Shakespeare makes it abundantly clear to his audiences that his lead figures are engulfed by the dividing politics of Egypt and Rome. Their political struggle in the play becomes overwhelming that it leaves audiences in wonderment about the disconnected love affair of Antony and Cleopatra. James Hirsh, author of the article Rome and Egypt in Antony and Cleopatra and in Criticism of the Play believes that “it is a critical commonplace that in the play, Rome and Egypt are associated with conflicting values or points of view” (Hirsh 175). However, he goes on to comment on how the political struggle is somewhat vague in regards to its true nature. He believes Shakespeare glosses over the complex implications and ramifications in order to sell out his characters fully. This contradicting thought can arguably leave audiences unaware of the true intentions of the piece. Was Shakespeare writing to seek adoration for his divided lovers or was he providing Elizabethans with a historical allegory on the distant past?

Not only is the division of political understanding prominent in the text, but another theme that Shakespeare explores is the division of emotion and rational thinking. Antony possesses a wealth of reputation when it comes to his loyalty to the Roman
Empire, yet his adoration of Cleopatra becomes so submissive and apparent, that he becomes clouded by emotion, over his political reputation. Throughout the text, Antony is constantly trying to find reasoning and logic between his passion and his political standing, yet there seems to be no hope for him. His constant shift in decisions weakens his love for Cleopatra and his power within the Roman army. One can argue therefore that Shakespeare is exposing Antony’s weakness as an individual, in the sense that he cannot live a divided life and that his heart must be set on one goal or purpose.

When it comes to assessing the play’s popularity in this instance, one has to identify their own human experience with the themes that Shakespeare exposes. While it can be said that Antony’s choices between political loyalty and passion are difficult to make, it is Antony’s attitude towards these options that make him less appealing as a leading figure. There are many choices in life that individuals must make and Antony is clearly trying to benefit from both options. It is his treachery in this instance that arguably becomes his biggest downfall and the one that brings down the power of his Cleopatra at the play’s closing. Critics therefore have to question if twenty-first century audiences would want to relate to characters such as Antony since his goals are so evenly divided. In comparison, Romeo makes audiences fully aware that his love for Juliet is more powerful than his loyalty to his family. The same cannot be said for Antony as in one scene, he aggess to marry Octavia to spare his suffering political reputation.

Robert A. Logan, Shakespearean critic and author of *High events as these: Sources, Influences and the Artistry of Antony and Cleopatra* describe the fine line between characters that reflect human experience or that are, for the most part fictitious. He comments on how “the ambivalences and ambiguities evident in the two protagonists’
motive and actions have only heightened our desire to possess a more complete knowledge of their psychologies” (Logan 153). Within the text, characters employ a number of tactics and ideas to achieve their own personal objective. Yet, critics become unaware that these characters possess a more important goal that is hidden by their subconscious. Logan goes on to comment how any scholarly argument directed towards the play has become “rich in substance and variety and considerably enlivened by controversy” (Logan 153). Critics will state their case for a certain character's intention, only to be counter-acted by another person’s views on a different perspective. Thus, the characters in Antony and Cleopatra contain goals and objectives that are so misleading (and governed by political action), that the text becomes daunting to follow and difficult to analyze.

While some of the characters seem honest and noble in this play and compare directly with those characters from Romeo and Juliet, others show a striking amount of trust issues and politically driven motives. Antony’s friend Enobarbus initially shows similar qualities to the friendship of Mercutio and Romeo, yet Enobarbus feels the pressure of conflict and deserts his friendship for Antony over personal fear. Thus, the text provides notions that both the Elizabethan audience and modern audience may not have appealed to. Audiences would appreciate more the value of friendship, which is abundantly clear in Romeo and Juliet, since Mercutio dies as a consequence of the family feud. Enobarbus however becomes cowardly, and prefers to show disloyalty and a lack of true companionship.

As mentioned earlier, the title character himself displays some unappealing qualities, such as his marital deceitfulness when expressing love for Cleopatra.
CLEOPATRA: If it be love indeed, tell me how much?

ANTONY: There's beggary in the love that can be reckoned.

(Crowther, 2011)

Although at this moment in the play, critics are unaware of Antony's marriage and become disgusted by his behavior when the messenger informs him of his wife's passing. Romeo on the other hand became a young lover, desperate for Juliet's hand in marriage and a character, who evokes sympathy over Tybalt's death. Furthermore, Antony's qualities as a leading figure in the play, should display courage, bravery and constant victory. Yet his downfall at the battle at sea and his reaction to his friend's desertion does not make the audience sympathetic of him. He becomes a puppet of war and the audience begin to feel sympathy for Cleopatra as the innocent victim in this tragedy. For both Romeo and Juliet, there is constant sympathy, since they appear as noble characters, desperate for each other's company without family feuding. Thus, another argument for Antony and Cleopatra's feigning popularity is provided. Both audiences want to see moralistic values in their characters and show sympathy for the ones that deserve it. *Antony and Cleopatra* becomes a play about the command for power, over the love affair of its leading characters.

The character of Cleopatra can instantly form a detailed character study. While there are a number of levels to Antony's personality and his lack of good choices, Cleopatra is unlike many of the other strong females in Shakespeare's canon. Primarily, her title role would suggest one of triumph and one that would assume her presence to please audiences. Yet her attributes are very similar to powerful women such as Lady
Macbeth and Titania in that they have a vicious quality. What makes Cleopatra dominate as an individual is her looks against her uneasy personality. Shakespeare is known to assimilate his unattractive women to have bold, brash and dominating capabilities. On the other scale, his attractive females become vulnerable, timid and keen on expressing admiration for young lovers. Juliet of course would fit perfectly into this realm. So too would Hermia; despite her dwarfish height, she still comes across as glamorous and charming.

One can suggest therefore that loyal Shakespeare followers expect his females to fall into certain types or dynamic qualities. That said, it becomes unusual to have a sexy, attractive female come across as a conjurer and manipulator of danger. As Deats describes Cleopatra, she portrays “a sexy siren and a treacherous temptress” (Deats 15). This perhaps becomes the first weakness for this particular text. Shakespeare is attempting to create a new genre and breaking away from the character traits he claimed much of his success from. While some can certainly appreciate the unique protagonists, it is not Shakespeare’s ideal craft, thus making him slightly vulnerable as a writer and open to criticism.

George Bernard Shaw, in his article on the text titled The Tragedy of Infatuation further condemns it by attacking Cleopatra as a leading lady. “The very name of Cleopatra suggests at once a tragedy of Circe, with the horrible difference whereas the ancient myth rightly represents Circe as turning heroes into hogs, the modern romantic convention would represent her as turning hogs into heroes” (Shaw 113). Cleopatra’s actions throughout the play can be regarded as understanding each other and herself. She relishes all the dramatic action that revolves around her and thrives on. Regarded as a
lustful gipsy, her actions are purely self-centered and while some might argue her love for Antony to be truthful, she controls and manipulates other characters to suit her goals. Shaw notes that, in Act 3 sc 13, Antony and Enobarus see her dallying with Thidias. But her true intentions are uncertain. “Do we watch a cunning queen outfox a wily politician, or a servant betray his mistress?” (Shaw 121). Audiences becomes as baffled as the characters and like them, are left to question the scene’s true intent.

The play itself, like many others in Shakespeare’s canon, is still performed regularly to a twenty-first century audience, yet it has very limited, albeit successful transformations. In 2008, a Theatre for New Audiences project at the Duke Theatre in London produced the text to little success. The text was notably transposed into the African setting with a nineteenth century European conquest. The transformation was part of an educational mission to make new theatre-goers aware of the connections between Europe, Africa and America. Theatre critic Elyse Sommer however slammed the production for having “uneven acting and directing choices” (Sommer 1) and also mentions how “comedic moments in the piece were downplayed to take a more operatic approach” (Sommer 1). It is evident therefore that many theatre practitioners strive to perform Shakespeare’s less recognized work in order to provide an educational outlet.

Despite this, the piece continues to become a recognized text, with the National Theatre in London preparing to open a production of the text. Notably, Alan Rickman and Helen Mirren will take the leading roles in a show directed by Sean Mathias, a director whose previous work has been highly regarded in the theatrical realm. One can argue that many producers and theatre practitioners prefer to stay true to the original text and setting in order to keep the historical elements fully intact. Therefore, another
suggestion for its lack of popularity in a modern society could be due to the lack of film or television adaptations. The characters in this piece, except perhaps for Caesar, are far from iconic like those in Romeo and Juliet. They lack true dimension, depth and prosperity. This adds further definition to the play’s relevance in the twenty-first century.

It is therefore interesting to see the number of factors it takes to boost the reputation of one of Shakespeare’s plays over another. While some scholars claim that it is because of outside influences such as initial critical acclaim, the number of Elizabethan performances, or even approval from the royalty, other scholars decide to make a literacy examination of each text, comparing and contrasting the plot and its relevance to the different audiences. They also appreciate the study of the value of character, to see if there’s any justification to the play’s popularity in how the characters conduct themselves. While all of Shakespeare’s thirty-seven plays are read at full capacity today, it is clear how some of his works excel in brilliance over others.
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