Romeo And Juliet As An Aristotelian Tragedy

Romeo and Juliet is one of the most known plays written by William Shakespeare. Everyone with more than a passing knowledge of English literature knows that it is a tragedy, but not everyone is aware of just how true this assessment is. Romeo and Juliet is a tragedy in more than just name, as it corresponds precisely to the formula of this genre as developed by the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. Romeo is a man with a tragic flaw of indecision, and this flaw leads him through a series of inevitable events to a devastating epiphany and a reversal of fate.

The main prerequisite of an Aristotelian tragedy is the main character possessing an unfortunate flaw that ultimately defines his fate. In the case of Romeo, this flaw is indecision. The first of the play's titular characters always hesitates to act, which leads to irreparable consequences, and when he finally acts, this makes the situation even worse. For instance, when Tybalt challenges him and then duels Mercutio, Romeo can only plead to "forbear this outrage," which results in Mercutio's death – and, after avenging Mercutio, Romeo's own exile (Shakespeare III.1). Then he becomes indecisive again – one would Romeo to devise some plan to reunite with his love, but it is Friar Laurence who does that, while the main male character remains purely passive. When Romeo, hearing false news regarding Juliet's death, resolves to act once again and arrives at the crypt, his actions result in three more deaths – Paris', his, and Juliet's (Shakespeare V.3). Therefore, Romeo demonstrates an obvious tragic flaw: his indecision causes him to remain passive until the very last, and then commit rash actions with irreversible consequences for himself and those around him.

A tragic flaw inherent in the main character is not the only constituent of Aristotle's definition of tragedy – another of its important components is an inevitability. As Paul Woodruff points out, the plot of an Aristotelian tragic play should be the logically inescapable consequence of events that "follow each other under necessity or likelihood" (304). This is precisely the case in Romeo and Juliet, since, after Romeo's fateful visit to the ball, the play unfolds with logical necessity. Tybalt is bound by honor to challenge Romeo, but Mercutio's understandable indignation with the latter's "calm, dishonorable, vile submission" leads him to pick a fight instead (Shakespeare III.1). After Mercutio's death, Romeo is obliged to kill Tybalt, and this necessarily brings his exile, as "the prince expressly hath/forbidden bandying in Verona streets" (Shakespeare III.1). The plot progresses not due to the author's fancy, but with a relentless logical inevitability, which makes the outcome of the play all the more impactful and also corresponds to the standard Aristotle set for tragedy the genre.

Another crucial element of an Aristotelian tragedy is recognition – a moment when the character learns a truth that changes his or her life drastically. The function of recognition – or, as Aristotle himself called it, anagnorisis – is leading the tragedy to its logical outcome, when the character pays the price for his or her faults. Recognition also has to occur when it is already too late for the characters to change anything, which is why it provides "a dramatic knot to [the tragedy's] denouement," but leaves no opportunity to subvert the outcome (Sissa 40). What makes Romeo and Juliet an interesting example of an Aristotelian recognition is that it happens for two characters in a row. For Romeo, the tragic revelation is learning of Juliet's presumed death, and this is why he resolves to "shake the yoke of inauspicious stars / from this world-wearied

flesh” and kills himself right in front of his supposedly dead beloved (Shakespeare V.3). Then Juliet wakes up only to find out Romeo dead, and, upon learning this devastating truth, promptly kills herself (Shakespeare V.3). Anagnorisis comes first for one character, and then for another one, but leads to an equally woeful result in both cases.

Finally, the finishing touch to an Aristotelian tragedy is the reversal that comes as a result of the recognition. The Greek philosopher defined this final act of a tragedy as a “change from good fortune to bad or vice versa,” and Romeo and Juliet actually offer examples of both (MacFarlane 375). On the one hand, fortune turns from good to bad: a carefully designed plan to reunite the loving souls happily ends in the death of Romeo and Juliet alike. On the other hand, however, the death of both titular characters leads to reconciliation between their rival families. This is definitely a positive change, although the Prince promptly asserts that, considering the circumstances, the end of the old enmity is “a glooming peace” at best (Shakespeare V.3).

Nevertheless, the reversal is still twofold: while Romeo and Juliet’s fate takes a decisive turn to the worst, their families finally put their feuds behind them for the benefit of all.

As one can see, Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet corresponds to Aristotle’s formula of tragedy to a letter. Romeo as the play’s main character has a tragic flaw of indecision, which is why his actions are always too late and only worsen the situation. A consequence of logically inevitable events leads first Romeo and then Juliet to the recognition of some unbearable truth in the last scenes of the play. This recognition paves the way for the reversal of fate for both the loving souls and their feuding families, in full accordance with an Aristotelian canon.

Works Cited

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