
**SHAKESPEARE’S REFLECTIONS ON LOVE AND LAW IN ROMEO AND
JULIET**

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ABSTRACT: This Article examines Shakespeare’s teaching in *Romeo & Juliet* about the power of love and the role of law. Broadly speaking, the play is about how the tragic death of the two young lovers overcomes the hatred between their families. At a deeper level, the play invites the reader to reflect upon the proper relationship between religion, and the political community and its laws, between divine love and human love. In the end, *Romeo and Juliet* points not only to the superiority of the proper separation of church and state, but also toward the possibility of an honorable faith that can exist alongside and support a vibrant political community—a possible reconciliation between love and law.

“Never was there a story of more woe,” the Prince of Verona tells us at play’s end, “than this of Juliet and her Romeo.”¹ Shakespeare’s tragic play, *Romeo and Juliet*, moves the reader through its hauntingly beautiful depiction of the “misadventured piteous overthrows” of the “star-crossed lovers.”² Yet, that is not the whole story, for Shakespeare places the love of *Romeo and Juliet* within the context of a larger plot: Friar Laurence’s (misguided) effort to restore political harmony in Verona by grounding the rule of law on a new foundation: a foundation of Christian love and contrition. The love-theme of *Romeo and Juliet*, then, is to be understood within this larger political theme as Shakespeare presents it to us in the Prologue:

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¹ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Romeo and Juliet*, in WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: THE COMPLETE WORKS 5.3.329-30 (Alfred Harbage ed., The Viking Press 1977) (1595) (The quotations from Shakespeare offered here are those of the Pelican edition).

² *Id.* at Prologue, 6-7.

Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;
Whose mis-adventured piteous overthrows
Doth with their death bury their parents' strife.³

Broadly speaking, the play is about how the tragic death of the two young lovers overcomes the hatred between their families. At a deeper level, the play invites the reader to reflect upon the proper relationship between Christianity and the political community and its laws, between divine love and human love. In the final analysis, *Romeo and Juliet* represents a fruitful picture of how the Church of Rome's mistreatment of Christianity leads to political decline, while hinting at the possibility of a healthy Christian political community.

The sad state of Catholic Verona, like Catholic Italy itself, constitutes a grave political problem. The Catholic Church's distorted understanding of the relationship between Christianity and politics actually helps create the political problem it later seeks to solve through its agent, Friar Laurence. The Church does this first through its assumption of political power and then through its efforts to reformulate the traditional understanding of justice. This effort at reformulation is carried forward by Friar Laurence, as he initially seeks to establish love and mercy as the foundation of law and justice. Two principal problems emerge from this effort as the play progresses, and these problems can be stated as lessons to be drawn from the play: (1) political and legal decisions based on the principles of love (and loving acts of mercy) are incapable of restraining the more violent and destructive human passions, such as greed, avarice, envy, and unprincipled ambition, and (2) when the transpolitical form of Christian love depicted in the play comes to supplant the traditional understanding of law and justice, civic life is robbed of its proper vitality. The competitiveness of citizens contending for public recognition by virtue of their respective claims to excellence is undermined. In short, the assumption of power by popes and priests in the name of supernatural authority and doctrines, as well as the

³ *Id.* at 1–8.

imposition of those doctrines on matters political, has left Verona a lawless place “[w]here civil blood makes civil hands unclean.”

With civic virtue and respect for the rule of law undermined in Verona, the political scene has deteriorated into tribal factionalism. The efforts by the Prince and Friar Laurence to correct the city’s factionalism through a misguided resort to Christian love and mercy only lead to greater bloodshed in general and an uncertain peace. Indeed, the bloody results of these efforts lead a desperate Friar Laurence to employ other spiritual stratagems—specifically consciousness of sin and the resulting guilt—in the hope of salvaging the disintegrating situation.

As the standard of brotherly love supplants honorific competitiveness, the political life retains little attraction for those spirited souls, such as Romeo, who yearn for lives that experience the heights of human potential. As a result, Romeo’s erotic soul attaches itself to the only remaining object of worth: the beautiful, as it manifests itself first in Rosaline, and ultimately in Juliet. Such beauty offers Romeo not only an unsullied object of his desire, but an escape from a world that otherwise holds little attraction for him. In the end, such all-consuming desire for the beautiful careens out of control, and leads to violence and ultimately, to death.

But it is also the case that, for Romeo and Juliet, the character of their love is powerfully influenced by particular, albeit different, Christian understandings of love. Romeo’s understanding of love is connected to his general contempt of this world and transforms his erotic attachment to Juliet into a private religion that is doomed (“death-marked”) from the start.

As will be argued, this transformation of Eros⁴ into a religion of love is a tendency to which erotic love is naturally prone. This natural tendency is exacerbated by that Christian teaching—perhaps a distorted Christian teaching—which exalts heavenly things to such an extent that worldly concerns are unduly diminished. Through his depiction of Juliet’s perception of love, however, Shakespeare seems to offer a sounder alternative understanding of the proper balance between human and divine love. In the end, Romeo and Juliet is a tragedy, but none of the characters seems to embody the kind of virtue one might properly consider heroic in nature. The play’s tragic nature may be best understood in the heroic but doomed efforts of Romeo and Friar Laurence—each in his own way—to

⁴ “Eros” will be capitalized throughout this essay in a manner consistent with the depiction of Eros as the god of love.

reconcile or transcend the tension between the merely human and the political, on the one hand, and divine love on the other.

Few critics, however, have found this play about love to convey a significant political teaching. As one writer has noted, these critics find the central themes to

rang[e] from a literal insistence on the lovers' star-crossed fate, to a Freudian view of their experience as an embodiment of the death-wish; from a neo-orthodox-Elizabethan lesson in the dangers of passion, to a providential triumph of love over hate.⁵

Three notable exceptions to these non-political critics can be found in essays by Allan Bloom, David M. Wagner, and Jerry Weinberger. All three provide helpful insights into the political philosophy of *Romeo and Juliet*.⁶

Bloom argues that the play reveals the “natural rights” of love and how the necessities and demands of the “anti-erotic” family are in tension with those natural rights.⁷ While his essay develops the theme of love and friendship, Bloom also points to the corrupting effect Christian mercy has on the political and shows how Italy at the time suffered the effects of that corruption.⁸ Wagner takes issue with Bloom’s argument regarding the family, contending that the play reveals the need to re-found the family. A re-founding in which Romeo and Juliet reject the patriarchal ordering of the family as a means to advance their social and economic position and replace it with the kind of genuine love that can be the “seedbed of love and civic virtue.”⁹

Weinberger’s essay is perhaps the best analysis of the play to date. Expanding on some of Bloom’s observations, Weinberger’s thesis is that Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* in large part to present his readers with an “especially fruitful picture” of the problem Christianity posed to the Western political world—a problem which led to the attempted solution

⁵ Douglas Cole, *Introduction*, in TWENTIETH CENTURY INTERPRETATIONS OF ROMEO AND JULIET 12 (Douglas Cole, ed., 1970).

⁶ ALLAN BLOOM, LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP (1993); David M. Wagner, Civil Blood, THE CLAREMONT INSTITUTE, Sept. 17, 2002, <http://www.claremont.org>; Jerry Weinberger, Pious Princes and Red-Hot Lovers: The Politics of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, 65 J. POL. 350-75 (2003).

⁷ BLOOM, *supra* note 6, at 276.

⁸ BLOOM, *supra* note 6, at 292-96.

⁹ WAGNER, *supra* note 6, at 10.

(via Machiavelli) that is modern politics.¹⁰ The play's tragic outcome, Weinberger contends, is an indictment of Christianity's baleful effect upon political life:

All this is due to the softness of the pious Prince, who believes along with the friar that heaven has been at work, the soft quarreling of a christianized and softened aristocracy, and the political meddling of a friar, whose morality sides with the people in two crucial respects: he sees all men as equal in the eyes of God and in their contamination by original sin, and he aims, in effect, fanatically at what the people most want: peace. Neither the Prince nor the friar intended this political outcome of the play. But it is the clear secular effect of their Christian motives.¹¹

Weinberger's argument that Machiavelli was critical of what he believed to be Christianity's corrosive effect on political life is compelling. Moreover, it is consistent with what Leo Strauss, a noted scholar of Machiavelli, has maintained:

He [Machiavelli] goes on to explain why, or by virtue of what, Christianity has led the world into weakness. By showing the truth and the true way, Christianity has lowered the esteem for 'the honor of the world,' whereas the pagans regarded that honor as the highest good and were therefore more ferocious or less weak in their actions.¹²

According to Bloom, Weinberger and Strauss, Machiavelli believes the honors bestowed on those who serve the common good, and that motivate such public servants, are jeopardized by the Christian depreciation of worldly goods in the name of humility and in favor of heavenly rewards. But to suggest that Machiavelli held this view of Christianity does not establish that Shakespeare did so as well.

The argument of this essay is that Bloom, Wagner, and Weinberger are correct, but only partially so. Instead of an attack on Christianity *per se*, *Romeo and Juliet* represents a fruitful picture of how the Church of Rome's mistreatment of Christianity leads to political decline. Moreover,

¹⁰ WEINBERGER, *supra* note 6, at 352.

¹¹ WEINBERGER, *supra* note 6, at 370.

¹² LEO STRAUSS, *THOUGHTS OF MACHIAVELLI*, 178 (1958).

Shakespeare leads his attentive readers to recognize not only the bad example of Friar Laurence’s Catholicism—including its deleterious effects on erotic love—but also a healthier alternative understanding of Christianity in the dedication to holy marriage as seen through Juliet’s thoughts and decisions. The combination of these two understandings does point toward modernity in the form of the separation of church and state. It is a modern state, however, that seeks to retain Christianity’s excellences, while restricting its jurisdiction over matters beyond its proper mandate.

The City and Its Laws

All is not well in “fair Verona,” with the “civil hands” of two feuding families producing the continuing shedding of “civil blood.” The ostensible cause of the factional warfare, it would seem, is unimportant: it is “born of an airy word / By thee, old Capulet, and Montague”¹³ No profound injustice on either house’s part began the fray. Rather, they fight for insignificant reasons. The forces tending to faction are more powerful than any forces tending to unite. James Madison could well have had this play in mind when he wrote about factions in Federalist 10:

So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities, that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts.¹⁴

Understanding the deeper cause of the illness afflicting the city’s soul requires further consideration.

The attitudes of Verona’s citizens toward the city’s laws provide a helpful starting point for reflection. The particular laws of a city or political community reflect, to greater and lesser degrees, the more comprehensive understanding of the political community’s good as a whole.¹⁵ This

¹³ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.1.83.

¹⁴ THE FEDERALIST 10, at 79 (James Madison) (The New American library, Inc: New York, New York, 1962).

¹⁵ ARISTOTLE, ARISTOTLE’S POLITICS, 1280b 10 (W.D. Ross ed., Oxford UP 1957): “Since we see that every polis is a community, and that every community is established for the sake of some good—since all do everything for the sake of what seems to them good—it is clear that all communities aim at some good, the one that does so in the highest degree and

comprehensive understanding of the good of the political community as reflected in its laws is also known as its understanding of justice: “The laws make pronouncements on every sphere of life, and their aim is to secure either the common good of all or of the best . . . accordingly, in one sense we call those things ‘just’ which produce and preserve happiness for the social and political community.”¹⁶ The honors and material goods are distributed according to the dictates of justice, and justice is understood within the context of the good—or ends—aimed at by the political community.¹⁷ This distribution mandates that equals are treated equally, and unequals are treated unequally.¹⁸ These traditional principles of law and justice set forth in books such as the writings of Aristotle and *The Federalist* reveal the potential excellence associated with the noblest aspects of political activity.

Given the sorry state of Verona’s political landscape, one should not be surprised to find that the eleven references to “the law” throughout the play are mocking or deprecating. None is respectful or deferential to the dignity or higher purposes of the rule of law. The play opens on such a note. The brawlers in the opening scene, Sampson and Gregory, servants of the house of Capulet, seek to manipulate the law in order to gain an advantage: “Is the law of our side, if I say ay?”¹⁹ Mercutio speaks of lawyers as mere money-grubbers in his rambling discourse on Queen Mab: “O’er lawyers’ fingers, who straight dream on fees....”²⁰ Justice receives but one reference in the play, and it is ultimately dismissed in the name of mercy.

As will be discussed below, of greater significance are Romeo’s and Friar Laurence’s denigrations of the rule of law and the proper understanding of justice. Of the play’s eleven references to the law, four are Friar Laurence’s. In his effort to console Romeo regarding his banishment, Friar Laurence praises the Prince’s (now second) act of “mercy,” contrasting it favorably with the city’s stern law of death. In the midst of a discussion that occurs at the very center of the play, Friar Laurence commends the “kind” Prince for

aims at the most authoritative of all goods is the community which is the most authoritative of all and embraces all others: this is the one called the polis or the political community.”

¹⁶ ARISTOTLE, *ARISTOTLE’S ETHICS*, 1129B 13-18 (Martin Ostwald, ed., the Liberal Arts Press, Inc. a Division of the Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc.: Indianapolis, Ind., 1962). See also *THE FEDERALIST* 51, at 324 (James Madison): “Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society. It ever has been and ever will be pursued until it be obtained, or until liberty be lost in the pursuit.”

¹⁷ ARISTOTLE, *supra* note 16, at 1281a 1-15.

¹⁸ ARISTOTLE, *supra* note 16, at 1281a 1-15.

¹⁹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.1.45.

²⁰ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.4.73.

having “rush’d aside the law,” choosing mercy instead.²¹ For Friar Laurence, it is only when the higher law of Christian mercy transforms, or even supplants, the human law that it truly serves justice. Romeo, too, deprecates the law in that it cannot aid the poor. He encourages the apothecary to break the law to escape his poverty: “The world is not thy friend nor the world’s law / The world affords no law to make thee rich / Then be not poor, but break it, and take this.”²² In contrast to Friar Laurence’s (and Romeo’s) understanding of justice, is that of bloody Verona. The play’s single reference to “justice” is Lady Capulet’s demand for Romeo’s execution after he has slain Tybalt.²³ The city’s laws diminish when they compete with the higher law of Christian mercy. In Verona, then, we find a city beset by factional fighting and a low regard for the rule of law. But what, if anything, does Verona’s relationship to Italy as a whole reveal?

While there are numerous references to Verona in *Romeo and Juliet*,²⁴ there is but a single reference (by cynical Mercutio) to Italy.²⁵ Nor do we find in *Romeo and Juliet* the manifest concern with the fate of the Roman nation that occupies the thoughts of the major characters in Shakespeare’s Roman plays, such as *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*, or his narrative poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*. Not only is there a discernible lack of national pride in *Romeo and Juliet*, the Italian city into which the lovers are born is likewise far removed from the timocratic state Shakespeare depicts in his Roman works, where honor in the sense of public acclaim moves the souls of the noble citizens. As Professor John Alvis has observed, Shakespeare’s works concerning Rome are noted for their extensive treatment of honor:

Roman history provides matter for four plays and a lengthy narrative poem.²⁶ These works feature plots that in every instance turn upon issues of honor: The violation of a woman’s honor, a soldier’s quest for recognition, a statesman’s decision to uphold his reputation for

²¹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.3.25–26.

²² SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.1.72–74.

²³ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.1.189–90.

²⁴ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at Prologue, 2; 1.1.90; 1.2.35; 1.2.86; 1.3.77; 1.5.67; 3.1.87; 3.3.15; 5.1.12; 5.3.300.

²⁵ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.1.2.

²⁶ The author is referring to *Titus Andronicus*, *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Rape of Lucrece*.

patriotism by slaying a despot, a lover's attempt to combine hedonism with personal fidelity for the sake of glory.²⁷

Alvis' observation is amply supported in the text of Shakespeare's Roman works. Coriolanus refuses to flatter the commoners, because they are dishonorable in his eyes, even though refusing to do so will ultimately cost him his life:

I will not do't
Lest I surcease to honour my own truth,
And by my body's action teach my mind
A most inherent baseness.²⁸

In Julius Caesar, Brutus pronounces his dedication to the common good of Rome in terms of his honor:

Set honor in one eye and death i' th' other,
And I will look on both indifferently;
For let the gods so speed as I love
The name of honor more than I fear death.²⁹

In the wake of her rape, Lucrece turns to suicide in order to reclaim her honor:

My honor I'll bequeath unto the knife
That wounds my body so dishonored.
'Tis honor to deprive dishonored life:
The one will live the other being dead.
So of shame's ashes shall my fame be bred,
For in my death I murder shameful scorn;
My shame so dead, mine honor is new born.³⁰

It is the spirited, honorific souls, Aristotle tells us, who tend to shape the spirit of the city itself.³¹ It is worth noting, then, that Romeo and Juliet

²⁷ JOHN ALVIS, *SHAKESPEARE'S UNDERSTANDING OF HONOR* 12 (Carolina Academic Press 1990). Alvis' book provides an excellent study of Shakespeare's thematic teaching on honor.

²⁸ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, Coriolanus, in *WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: THE COMPLETE WORKS* 3.3.120-123 (Alfred Harbage ed., The Viking Press 1977) (1595).

²⁹ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, Julius Caesar, in *WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: THE COMPLETE WORKS* 1.2.86-89 (Alfred Harbage ed., The Viking Press 1977) (1595).

³⁰ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, The Rape of Lucrece, in *WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: THE COMPLETE WORKS* 1184-90 (Alfred Harbage ed., The Viking Press 1977) (1595).

³¹ ARISTOTLE, *supra* note 16, at 1095b.

contains few references to “honor.”³² One finds no expressions of public honor or spiritedness by the players in *Romeo and Juliet* that could be considered similar to the Roman works. The sole exception, as will be discussed at the conclusion of this essay, is that of Juliet, who connects her marital fidelity with honor and her faith. But even Juliet lacks the sense of honor that is peculiarly public or patriotic in character.

This latter Rome, on display in Verona, is bereft of the honor-seeking citizens of pre-Christian Rome. By far the most interesting thing Verona can produce is the personal love story of the “death-marked lovers.” While Verona may be “fair,” it is not timocratic. Neither house justifies its fighting the other on the grounds of superior merit. Love, as it manifests itself in the personal and the political, is the key to the play. While *Romeo and Juliet* are at its center, neither ultimately determines the play’s action, at least they do not do so in any self-conscious sense. To a considerable extent, they appear subject to forces beyond their control whether operating from within their own souls or on their souls from without.

With the notable exceptions of Friar Laurence and the Prince, the play’s characters are either apolitical or political merely in the sense of supporting one or the other of the warring factions. Largely, the characters are either lovers or quarrelers. Even the Prince, the play’s principle political figure, indulges in mainly empty threats of punishment—appealing to “peace” and the tradition of the families.³³ He does not speak to the citizens of Verona as “Italians” or “Citizens of Proud Verona.” *Romeo*, when we first meet him, is disgusted by the political situation: “What fray was here? Yet tell me not, for I have heard it all.”³⁴ Tybalt scorns the communal order, that “peace” to which the Prince appeals: “I hate the word / As I hate hell . . .”³⁵ Opposed to Tybalt are the citizens, who appear concerned with nothing other than maintaining the peace.³⁶ The Church’s agent, Friar Laurence, is more effectual than the Prince, and he will deliver the citizens their peace through his machinations. But Friar Laurence’s peace will likely be short-lived: in the end, it will be a “glooming peace.”³⁷

³² Tybalt more closely resembles the honorific soul than does any other character in the play. However “fiery” Tybalt’s understanding of honor is purely reflexive and angry, containing no reflection or awareness of honor’s higher aspects, and rooted only in familial allegiance, the “stock and honor of my kin.” SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.5.58.

³³ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.1.79.

³⁴ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.1.172.

³⁵ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.1.67–68.

³⁶ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.1.72 -73; 3.1.136 37, 39 – 40.00

³⁷ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.3.5.

There simply is no larger sense of civic purpose, public honor, patriotism, or justice in the play. The factions fight, and the city suffers. This political aimlessness is reflected in the sense of contrariness and apparent accident that characterizes the manner in which the events of the play unfold: from Romeo's rambling discourse on the clashing and paradoxical nature of love,³⁸ to Friar John's failure to get the news of Juliet to Romeo because of the plague,³⁹ or Romeo's suicide occurring just before Juliet awakens.⁴⁰ How do the play's characters help us understand this enfeebled state of affairs in which Verona (and Italy) finds itself?

The Prince: The Political Response

In *The Discourses*, Machiavelli treats, at some length, the problem of Italy's politically divided cities, identifying Italy's Roman Catholicism as the ultimate source of the political trouble.⁴¹ Shakespeare clearly presents Verona as one such city, rendered weak by factional discord. Machiavelli sets forth the manner in which a divided city must be united with stark clarity:

For it is necessary to pick one of three modes: either to kill them, as they did; or to remove them from the city; or to make them make peace together under obligations not to offend one another. Of these three modes, this last is most harmful, least certain, and most useless... But without doubt the first [mode] would have been most secure. Because such executions have in them something of the great and of the generous, however, a weak republic does not know how to do them and is so distant from them that it is led to the second remedy only with trouble. These are among the errors I told of at the beginning that the princes of our times make who have to judge great things, for they ought to wish to hear how those who have had to judge such cases in antiquity governed themselves. But the weakness of men

³⁸ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.1.169 -180.

³⁹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.2.14 -16.

⁴⁰ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.3.119 – 147.

⁴¹ NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI, *THE DISCOURSES ON LIVY* 37-38 (Harvey C. Mansfield & Nathan Tarkov trans., University of Chicago Press 1996).

at present, caused by their weak education and their slight knowledge of things, makes them judge ancient judgments in part inhuman, in part impossible.⁴²

Prince Escalus seems to have been taken straight from Machiavelli's model of the weak ruler. The citizens do not readily listen to him: "Will they not hear? What, ho! you men, you

beasts"⁴³ He initially embraces Machiavelli's "most hurtful, the least reliable and the most futile" method after he confronts the initial letting of "civil blood." However, as the Prince tells us, this is the third such "civil brawl." After he solemnly declares that death will be the sentence "if ever you disturb our streets again . . . ," he does not follow through.⁴⁴ After the ensuing (fourth) brawl, the Prince exiles Romeo for killing Tybalt rather than sentencing him to death.⁴⁵

Banishing Romeo is Machiavelli's second remedy, which characterizes a weak republic. Since the law dictates Romeo's death, the Prince effectively ignores his own counsel: "Mercy but murders, pardoning those that kill."⁴⁶ As Machiavelli predicts, the Prince mercifully spares Romeo the "inhuman" punishment the law decrees.

The Prince's second failure to apply the law, choosing mercy instead, contributes to another unnecessary death—that of County Paris at Romeo's hands. The Prince's disposition to choose mercy over the commands of the law, even while being conscious of the problematic nature of his choice, reveals the Catholic Church's influence on his political judgment. It reveals, in Machiavelli's words, his "defective education." Even his final pronouncement reveals this influence: "See what a scourge is laid upon your hate / That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love."⁴⁷ The Prince is deferential to the representative of Rome, Friar Laurence. When it becomes clear at the play's end how entangled the friar is in the events leading to the deaths of Romeo, Juliet, and Paris, the Prince refuses to punish or even criticize him: "[w]e still have known thee for a holy man" is all the Prince says.⁴⁸ In effect, the Prince says, "because you are the holy representative of

⁴² MACHIAVELLI, *supra* note 41, at 274-75.

⁴³ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.1.77.

⁴⁴ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.1.90.

⁴⁵ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.1.184-95.

⁴⁶ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.1.195.

⁴⁷ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.3.292-93.

⁴⁸ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.3.269.

Rome, you must be given every presumption of innocence.” The Prince’s submission to the Church’s authority is apparent.

As noted earlier, when addressing the citizens, the Prince never refers to “Italy” or “Italians.” The play’s only reference to “Italy”⁴⁹ is made by the cynical Mercutio, who alone seems concerned with maintaining national pride and is critical of the “French” influence on Italian customs.⁵⁰ While there is but the single reference to “Italy” in the play, there are three references to “Saint Peter’s Church,” indicating the latter’s greater influence.⁵¹ The Church’s representative is Friar Laurence.

Friar Laurence: Ecclesiastical Politics and The Regime of Prefect Love

Concerning the Catholic Church’s role in the Italian cities’ decline, Machiavelli wrote as follows:

The cause that Italy is not in the same condition [united] and does not also have one republic or one prince to govern it is solely the church... Thus, since the church has not been powerful enough to be able to seize Italy, nor permitted another to seize it, it has been the cause that [Italy] has not been able to come under one head but has been under many princes and lords, from whom so much disunion and so much weakness have arisen that it has been led to be the prey not only of barbarian powers but of whoever assaults it. For this we other Italians have an obligation to the church and not to others.⁵²

Prior to Machiavelli, Dante expressed similar concerns regarding the Church of Rome in *The Divine Comedy*. In Canto 16 of *Purgatory*, Dante approves Marco Lombardo’s claim that

Rome, which made the world good, was wont to have
Two Suns, which made visible both the one road and
the other, that of the world and that of god. The one

⁴⁹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.1.2.

⁵⁰ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.2.43.

⁵¹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.5.115, 117, 155.

⁵² MACHIAVELLI, *supra* note 41, at 1:12.

has quenched the other, and the sword is joined to the
crook: and the one together with the other must perforce
go ill. . . . the Church of Rome, by confounding in itself
two governments, falls in the mire and befouls both
itself and its burden.⁵³

Dante bemoans the state of 14th century Italy: “Ah, Italy enslaved, hostel of misery, ship without pilot in great tempest, no princess among the provinces but a brothel!”⁵⁴ Factionalism is rampant throughout the country: “For all the cities of Italy are full of tyrants and every clown that plays the partisan becomes a Marcellus.”⁵⁵ Two of the warring families Dante specifically identifies in Canto 6 are the “Montagues and Capulets.”⁵⁶ The problem facing Italy, Dante suggests, is twofold: the absence of the Holy Roman Emperor and the pernicious influence of ecclesiastical politics.

Shakespeare’s play presents the state of Italian politics in a manner notably similar to the descriptions provided by Machiavelli and Dante. Dante criticizes those priests who seek to usurp the civil authority in the name of the Roman church: “Ah, ye that should be devout and let Caesar sit in the saddle if you gave good heed to God’s direction to you, see how this beast has turned vicious for lack of correction by the spurs since you laid hold of the bridle.”⁵⁷ Shakespeare depicts Friar Laurence in a similar fashion. As the dutiful agent of the Church of Rome, Friar Laurence lays hold of the bridle and controls the action of the play more directly than any other character. The results are disastrous.

When we first meet the Franciscan Friar Laurence, it is early in the morning. Surprisingly, the friar is not at prayer but, instead, is filling up his wicker basket with “baleful weeds and precious-juiced flowers.”⁵⁸ In fact, we never encounter Friar Laurence, or any character in the play, at prayer. As he goes about his business, the friar meditates on the nature of man and how man’s nature reflects the innate qualities to be found in nature herself. Indeed, the friar appears to be a serious student of nature, and we see that the potion he

⁵³ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Purgatorio Canto XVI* at 106 – 12, 127-29 (John D. Sinclair ed., Oxford UP 1979).

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 78–80.

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 123.

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 106. Given Shakespeare’s choice of the Montagues and Capulets as the representative families of his play, and Dante’s use of the same names, along with similar depictions of the political and religious situation plaguing Verona, it would seem to be a reasonable assumption that Shakespeare intended the time period of *Romeo and Juliet* to be the 14th century.

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 6.91–95.

⁵⁸ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.3.8.

will later give to Juliet is likely the result of his studies: “Within the infant rind of this weak 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.”⁵⁹

While the friar speaks about grace, it is of the natural rather than supernatural variety.⁶⁰ Moreover, his comments about human nature are surprisingly political and are not what one might consider a more orthodox Christian understanding: “Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied / And vice sometime’s by action dignified.”⁶¹ It is a curious form of Christian doctrine that holds a successful outcome can dignify vice. Necessity may justify vice, but orthodox Christian teaching would not hold that it dignifies it. The friar seems less concerned with the spiritual aspects of his calling than he is with practical considerations—medicine and the political consequences of moral decisions—that he later refers to as “my art.”⁶² In his private reveries, we see a friar whose reflections on the practical aspects of life are consistent with one who is ready to lay hold of the city’s “bridle.” Indeed, the friar will soon put his thoughts into action. It is in the midst of these reveries that Romeo approaches Friar Laurence asking him to perform the marriage ceremony. In agreeing to do so, Friar Laurence believes he is dignifying the vice of an ill-advised marriage by acting for the greater good of a peaceful Verona. What the friar does not know is that he is actually turning virtue into vice by misapplying Christian love in his effort to rid Verona of its civic strife.

Friar Laurence is not obtuse, and he knows Romeo’s passion for Juliet is far short of anything resembling a mature, authentic love. He chides Romeo for having abandoned his “love” for Rosaline at the first sight of Juliet: “Young men’s love then lies / Not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes.”⁶³ The friar instructs his student on the difference between youthful longing and true love, criticizing Romeo for “doting, not for loving, pupil mine.”⁶⁴ Nevertheless, he agrees to marry Romeo and Juliet: “For this alliance may so happy prove / To turn your households’ rancor to pure love.”⁶⁵ At first blush, the friar’s goal seems laudable, but upon further reflection, it is remarkably presumptuous. The friar will marry Romeo and Juliet, not

⁵⁹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.3.23–26.

⁶⁰ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.3.14, 28.

⁶¹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.3.21–22.

⁶² SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.3.243.

⁶³ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.3.67–68.

⁶⁴ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.3.82.

⁶⁵ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.3.91–92.

because it is wise for them to be married—their love is suspect at best—but because he will thereby transform the civic life of Verona itself, creating “pure love” where factionalism once reigned. Friar Laurence’s agenda is to resolve the city’s factional problem through the marriage. This is far beyond the more reasonable and modest expectation of tempering factional discord. Friar Laurence wants his new society to be one that lives and is ruled by love, not harsh justice. He opposes the universalism of Christian love to the families’ political factionalism so that common brotherhood will come to dominate over political distinctions. Rather than respect and fear the rule of law, the friar will bring the Capulets and Montagues to love one another.

It is important to note that Shakespeare himself tells us at the beginning of the play that a scheme such as the friar’s marriage plan will not work to quench “the continuance of their parents’ rage / Which, but their children’s end, naught could remove.”⁶⁶ Confirming what he indicated in the Prologue, Shakespeare reveals that even if the friar had succeeded in marrying Romeo and Juliet, their parents’ rage would not have been quenched, and the young lovers would probably have had to live in exile in order to stay married. Such rebelliousness by their children would not likely have been tolerated by the parents, and we certainly see this play out later in their furious reaction to Juliet’s refusal to marry Paris.⁶⁷

Friar Laurence’s plan is flawed, and his competence in such political matters falls short. He lacks prudence. The friar is incapable of salvaging the flawed marriage plan when it goes awry by the imminent marriage of Juliet and Paris. It was no secret that the Capulets were interested in Juliet marrying Paris.⁶⁸ Not only does the friar’s marriage plan set in motion a chain of events resulting in the deaths of Romeo and Juliet, the deaths of Mercutio and the County Paris also may be attributed in large part to his misguided belief that he can cure Verona’s political problem.⁶⁹

Not only does Friar Laurence lack the competence needed to successfully manage his political agenda, his treatment of the Christian doctrines of love and mercy are theoretically suspect as well. The Bible’s teaching on mercy does not appear to support the friar’s interpretation of its political utility.

⁶⁶ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at Prologue, 10–11.

⁶⁷ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.5.140-197.

⁶⁸ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.1.1-37; 1.3.63-103.

⁶⁹ As noted earlier, had the Prince carried out the law and executed Romeo for killing Tybalt, the unnecessary death of Paris would never have occurred. But it is also the case that Paris would never have been at the Capulets’ tomb, or fought with Romeo, had it not been for the friar’s marriage plan and his subsequent plan to fake the death of Juliet.

The Bible's focus is upon mercy's healing effect on the individual souls of believers and how believers are to treat their fellow man in the daily workings of their lives. Both Old and New Testaments teach that the Lord is a merciful God.⁷⁰ The New Testament reveals how God's mercy will assume its ultimate form when Christ's teaching and, ultimately, his death bring salvation to mankind.⁷¹ Believers are to show mercy to their fellow men in the course of their daily lives.⁷²

Moreover, mercy is not said to supplant justice, but to accompany it: "And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."⁷³ Or as the prophet Zechariah instructed: "And the word of the Lord came again to Zechariah: "This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another."⁷⁴ The New Testament, where the advent of Christ and his love is understood to complete the law of the Old Testament, does not abandon the concept of justice and mercy as complementary rather than at odds with one another: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness."⁷⁵ One is hard-pressed to find Biblical passages instructing political authorities to forego justice or just laws in favor of mercy. Indeed, central to the teaching of the New Testament concerning Christ's purpose on earth involves his death as the necessary price or ransom for the forgiveness of the sins of mankind.⁷⁶ This, Paul says, was a matter of justice: "[God] did this to demonstrate his justice."⁷⁷ Mercy and justice appear to work together in God's plan as presented in scripture.⁷⁸ They are not separated. Christ received no pardon from God. Considering this scriptural background, and given his depiction of Friar Laurence's failed effort to utilize the doctrines of love and mercy as political tools rather than spiritual

⁷⁰ See, e.g., Deuteronomy 4:31, 9:18; Nehemiah 9:31; Psalms 77:9; Jeremiah 3:12; Daniel 9:9; 2Samuel 24:14; 1Chronicles 21:13; Luke 1:50; Romans 9:18; 1Peter 1:3; Psalms 25:6, 28:6; Micah 7:18.

⁷¹ See, e.g., Jude 21; 1Peter 1:3.

⁷² See, e.g., Matthew 5:7, 9:13, 18:33; Luke 6:36; Jas 2:13; Jude 22-23; Hebrews 3:2.

⁷³ Micah 6:8.

⁷⁴ Zechariah 7:8-9.

⁷⁵ Matthew 23:23.

⁷⁶ See, e.g., Romans 3:22-26.

⁷⁷ See, e.g., Romans 3:25.

⁷⁸ See, e.g., THOMAS AQUINAS, *The Summa Theologica*, in THE BASIC WRITINGS OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS 227 (Anton C. Pegis ed., 1945). In the words of Thomas Aquinas: "God acts mercifully, not indeed by going against His justice, but by doing something more than justice."

counsels, Shakespeare appears to be illustrating the corrosive effect of the Church's foray into ecclesiastical politics. But the friar's machinations are not yet complete.

Once Friar Laurence learns from Juliet of the plans to have her married to Paris, and that she intends to commit suicide rather than go through with the marriage, he is forced to devise a second plan—one far more “desperate” than the marriage plan.⁷⁹ For Christians the incarnation of love is Christ, and the friar takes his cue from this central tenet of his faith. Because of the friar's scheme, Juliet will imitate Christ by spending 42 hours in the tomb.⁸⁰ Thus, Friar Laurence devises his ‘resurrection plan’ once his marriage plan has gone awry. Critical to the success of this second plan is informing Romeo that Juliet is not really dead. The messenger, Friar John, does not deliver the letter to Romeo because a report of the plague delayed his “speed to Mantua.” Had the messenger been Balthasar, as he promised Romeo it would be, there appears no reason why the letter would not have been successfully delivered.⁸¹

Moreover, we learn that Friar Laurence neglected to tell the busy Friar John how important the letter was, such that if delayed, he should make alternate arrangements to get word to Romeo (or Friar Laurence).⁸² It is only now when it is too late, because Romeo was told that Juliet is dead, that Friar Laurence alerts Friar John to the importance of the message: “By my brotherhood / The letter was not nice, but full of charge / Of dear import; and the neglecting it / May do much danger.”⁸³ Instead of recognizing his own negligence in failing to take the necessary precautions, Friar Laurence blames “[u]nhappy Fortune” and “these accidents.”⁸⁴ He is equally willing to lay the blame at heaven's feet, rather than accept his own considerable part in the unhappy outcome of events, as he laments to Juliet in the scene in the Capulet tomb: “A greater power than we can contradict / Hath thwarted our intents.”⁸⁵ His efforts to write Romeo a second time will be too late, and his plan's consequences now play out at the Capulets' tomb with the death of Paris at Romeo's hand, as well as the suicides of Romeo and Juliet.

⁷⁹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 4.1.69-70.

⁸⁰ BLOOM, *supra* note 6, at 294.

⁸¹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.3.169–71.

⁸² See Bert Cardullo, *The Friar's Flaw, the Play's Tragedy; The Experiment of Romeo and Juliet*, 28 CLA J. 408 (1984-1985). Cardullo notes the friar's lack of prudence as well in his essay: “Friars Laurence's rashness is responsible for Friar John's detention, not chance . . . It is the Friar's fault that Balthasar is unaware of her feigned death.”

⁸³ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.2.17–19.

⁸⁴ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.2.17, 25.

⁸⁵ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.3.153 -154.

More shocking than his imprudence, however, is Friar Laurence's cowardice. He fears being discovered as the architect of the events leading to the scene in the tomb.⁸⁶ His cowardice leads him to flee the tomb—he “dare no longer stay”—even though he knows that Juliet will probably kill herself once he leaves.⁸⁷ He is later found trembling, sighing, and weeping.⁸⁸ The more one looks at the kindly and well-meaning friar, the more flawed he appears. These deaths are not the result of accidents. They are the product of Friar Laurence unwisely seeking to control Verona's political landscape.

The influence of the Church's teaching on mercy led the Prince to forgo the dictates of the law, thereby contributing to the deaths of those who might not otherwise have died. As the Church's representative, Friar Laurence fully endorses the Prince's preference for mercy over the strict form of justice mandated by Verona's laws. He upbraids Romeo for failing to appreciate the mercy of the Prince's exiling rather than executing him: “Thy fault our law calls death; but the kind Prince / Taking thy part, hath rushed aside the law / And turned that black word ‘death’ to banishment / This is dear mercy, and thou seest it not.”⁸⁹ Whereas the Prince employs mercy as a political tool, the friar employs mercy's complement, which is love, as the instrument to perform his political craft.

The friar's resurrection plan also fits in with his understanding of the political utility of mercy. The new plan will utilize other central Christian doctrines to advance the friar's political agenda, specifically consciousness of sinfulness, atonement, and reconciliation. Once the marriage plan failed, the friar was forced to come up with this other, more radical plan to avoid the forced marriage to Paris that will likely result in Juliet's suicide. The friar may also continue to entertain hope that he can still salvage his plan to cure Verona's factionalism. Why did the friar choose this plan?

We recall that after Romeo had been banished, the friar instructed him to go to Mantua “where thou shalt live till we can find a time / To blaze your marriage, reconcile your friends / Beg pardon of the Prince, and call thee back / With twenty hundred thousand times more joy / Than thou went'st

⁸⁶ See GERRY BRENNER, *Shakespeare's Politically Ambitious Friar*, in SHAKESPEARE STUDIES 47-58, (vol. 13 1980) (including a helpful analysis of Friar Laurence's motives, “however, fails to appreciate the extent to which the friar represents the agenda of the Catholic Church, rather than his own interests more narrowly defined)

⁸⁷ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.3.159-60.

⁸⁸ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.3.184.

⁸⁹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.3.24-27.

forth in lamentation.”⁹⁰ Surely, it would be easier to secret Juliet away to Mantua to join Romeo immediately, rather than construct this elaborate resurrection ruse. The friar realizes that such a course not only would likely subject Romeo and Juliet to a life of poverty and exile, but it would also destroy his hope to save the city from itself. Friar Laurence would be exposed as a lawless meddler, disdainful of the families’ concerns, rather than a “reverend holy friar” to whom “the whole city is much bound.”⁹¹ Instead, he must prepare the ground before revealing his role in the matter by manipulating the families’ grief and guilt. By so doing, the friar hopes to diffuse the anger the families would turn toward him as well as retain the moral high ground he enjoys as a holy man. The friar believes only something evoking the meaning and effect of Christ’s death on believers reenacted through Juliet may salvage his own reputation as well as his hope to reconcile the families.

What are the components of Friar Laurence’s more radical resurrection plan? First, Christ died to atone for the sins of mankind. Accordingly, this second plan has the advantage of reminding the Capulets of their own sinfulness, for which the vicarious death of the Juliet-Christ is required to atone.⁹² Consciousness of sin and guilt, the friar knows from his faith, undermines pride and hatred. Romeo’s banishment has already chastened the Montagues, with Lady Montague having died because of her grief over her son’s exile.⁹³ The friar must now work on the Capulets, and he does not hesitate to remind them of their sinful behavior. As they grieve Juliet’s apparent death, Friar Laurence chastises the Capulets for the selfish, political motivation that caused them to seek their daughter’s marriage with Paris: “The most you sought was her promotion / For ‘twas your heaven she should be advanced.”⁹⁴ The friar then suggests to the Capulets that they are responsible in some manner for Juliet’s death: “The heavens do low’r upon you for some ill / Move them no more by crossing their high will.”⁹⁵ Of course, since Juliet remains alive, this is a blatant lie, but one that is useful in sowing the seeds of guilt in the souls of the Capulets. The friar is a

⁹⁰ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.3.150–54.

⁹¹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 4.2.31–32.

⁹² WEINBERGER, *supra* note 6, at 368. Weinberger argues, somewhat differently, that Friar Laurence’s goal in staging the fake resurrection is to “punish” the Capulets through Juliet’s death, in order to “prepare them for a gratitude that could overwhelm their sense of political loss and reconcile them to the connection with the Montagues. . . .” A continuing sense of sinfulness, I would contend, is both more central to Christian teaching than punishment, as well as the more effective antidote to pride.

⁹³ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.3.210–11.

⁹⁴ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 4.5.71–72.

⁹⁵ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 4.5.94–95.

liar, but he defended himself on the grounds that the good that his latest plan will accomplish justifies his actions. In his own words: “vice [is] sometime’s by action dignified.”⁹⁶

Second, Christian doctrine holds that Christ’s resurrection defeated hatred and death, bringing peace and joy to those who believe in him. Similarly, the joy the Capulets will experience once they realize she is not dead—her “resurrection”—combined with the consciousness of their own sinfulness, would undermine the pride and hatred that forms the basis for the factional discord. Of course, the fact that Juliet is alive must be revealed. Empty tombs are not easily explained. Moreover, we know that Lady Capulet had a spy in Mantua.⁹⁷ The friar is gambling that the Capulets will be reminded of the mystery of the resurrection and atonement once Juliet is revived, and that this will evoke humble gratitude on their part. He is gambling that this gratitude will mingle with their guilt, of which he has reminded them, and lead them not only to excuse the friar’s interference but also embrace reconciliation with the Montagues. Such is Friar Laurence’s “desperate” “hope.”⁹⁸

As Shakespeare referenced in the Prologue, and the friar fails to grasp, the successful reconciliation (even if only temporary) of the families requires Juliet’s actual, not feigned, death. In fact, it requires the actual death of both children. Indeed, it is likely that had the Capulets discovered that Juliet was never really dead, their happiness would have been tempered, and their consciousness of guilt removed, such that reconciliation with the Montagues would not have transpired. With the lovers’ deaths dies the friar’s scheme, but only in part. The necessary consciousness of sin and accompanying guilt brought on by the friar’s machinations remain. Indeed, the guilt is increased as the parents recognize the lovers’ (and Juliet’s in particular) dedication to love and come to see the sinfulness of their own petty hatreds in that light. The pious Prince drives this point home, extolling the children’s “course of love” and condemning the families’ unchristian hatred: “See what a scourge is laid upon your hate / That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love.”⁹⁹ As Shakespeare told us at the beginning of the play, the sanction, the reality of death, is necessary to control and subdue the most destructive political passions. Religious sanction may increase guilt and undermine pride, but in the end, death is required to subdue this kind of factional discord. Only now are Montague and Capulet ready to reconcile.

⁹⁶ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.3.22.

⁹⁷ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.5.88–93.

⁹⁸ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 4.1.68–70.

⁹⁹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.3.287, 282–93.

While Shakespeare presents Friar Laurence as meddling, imprudent, and cowardly, he does not present him as a vicious man in any way. Gerry Brenner's depiction of the friar as "prompted by self-aggrandizing ambitions that are equal to, if not stronger than, those in Capulet and Prince Escalus" is misplaced to the extent that it understands the friar as acting out of a desire for self-promotion.¹⁰⁰ Rather, Friar Laurence truly believes that he is advancing the good of Verona. In this way he serves the Church and its effort to control the political landscape, but he does so with "good intentions."

Justice is lacking in Verona as familial tribalism dominates. The weak Prince is certainly not the answer, but neither is Friar Laurence in his effort to provide a political cure, first in the form of Christian love, and then in the form of consciousness of sin. He politicizes what should remain non-political and neglects his proper office of tending to his flock's spiritual needs. The friar might have exerted his influence on the individual citizens' attitudes toward one another by counseling them against misguided ambition, pride, and anger, and encouraging them in the name of love and forgiveness. In fact, he seems more interested in politics and philosophy. While he does suggest Romeo consult the consolations of philosophy, Friar Laurence never recommends prayer or attention to matters of faith to Romeo when the young lover is bemoaning his banishment from Verona.

Romeo, Juliet, Mercutio, Paris, Lady Montague, and perhaps even Tybalt, are all dead in large part due to Friar Laurence's effort to resolve Verona's factionalism. His effort has been to control, even transform, vicious political passions by means of his Christian doctrines of mercy, love, and consciousness of sin. His efforts have only led to more death. Friar Laurence conflates the city of God and the city of man. In so doing, he neglects the teaching on eternity that properly attends the former, while undermining the proper attention to the temporal realities that rightly attend the latter. Friar Laurence "should be devout," but Dante and Shakespeare agree he is not.¹⁰¹ Shakespeare would also appear to agree, at least in part, with Machiavelli's stinging rebuke that "[t]he first debt which we, Italians, owe to the Church and to priests, therefore, is that we have become irreligious and perverse."¹⁰² The solution must be a political one, whereby the law and justice are respected and enforced in cities where public honor and a sense of national pride prevail in due course. The friar's misuse of

¹⁰⁰ BRENNER, *supra* note 86, at 48.

¹⁰¹ DANTE, *supra* note 53, at 6.85.

¹⁰² MACHIAVELLI, *supra* note 41, at 1:12.

Christian love, however, is not the whole of the story Shakespeare is telling us on the subject.

Romeo and the Law of Love

In her musings on her balcony, Juliet asks: “Wherefore art thou Romeo?”¹⁰³ Who is Romeo? The easy answer is that supplied by Mercutio: “[y]ou are a lover.”¹⁰⁴ Indeed, Romeo is a deeply erotic soul, consumed with the idea of love. Romeo’s fixation with love supplies cynical Mercutio with opportunities to ridicule his friend: “Romeo! humors! madman! passion! lover! / Appear thou in the likeness of a sigh; / Speak but one rhyme, and I am satisfied!”¹⁰⁵ Romeo is also a Christian, or at least shaped by the Christianity of his day as it has come down from Saint Peter’s Church and his teacher, Friar Laurence. As such, Romeo accepts Christianity’s teaching concerning the absolute superiority of love, but he fails to keep divine and human love within their proper spheres, creating in Juliet the object of his religion of love. Romeo’s confusion concerning divine and human love is reflected in his initial discourse with Benvolio when he expresses his belief in the contradictory character of reality, and, in particular, of love. He does so in a way that includes theological themes such as chaos, creation, and human vanity: “Why then, O brawling love, O loving hate / O anything, of nothing first create! / O heavy lightness, serious vanity / Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms.”¹⁰⁶ These remarks follow Romeo’s observation of the results of the initial fight between the families, when he cryptically remarks: “Here’s much to do with hate, but more with love.”¹⁰⁷ Romeo may simply be saying that the families’ hatred flows from the excesses of their own self-love. Shakespeare may, however, be indicating through Romeo’s comment the deeper issue of the problematic manner in which love is understood in an Italy dominated politically and theologically by the Catholic Church.

In any discussion of love it is helpful to consider its close kinship to Eros, or erotic longing. As the son of Aphrodite in Greek mythology, Eros was

¹⁰³ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.2.48.

¹⁰⁴ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.4.17.

¹⁰⁵ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.1.7 – 9.

¹⁰⁶ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.1.174–77.

¹⁰⁷ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.1.173.

the god of love. On one level, Eros represented sexual love or desire.¹⁰⁸ One can desire many other things, obviously, not all of them praiseworthy. In classical thought, however, Eros transcends unworthy desires, and even sexual desire, because of Eros' preoccupation with the beautiful. In Plato's Symposium, it is Diotima who gives us this classical account of Eros, as she tells Socrates:

Such is the right approach or induction to love-matters. Beginning from obvious beauties he must for the sake of that highest beauty be ever climbing aloft, as on the rungs of a ladder, from one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies; from personal beauty he proceeds to beautiful observances, from observance to beautiful learning, and from learning at last to that particular study which is concerned with the beautiful itself and that alone; so that in the end he comes to know the very essence of beauty. In that state of life above all others, my dear Socrates, said the Mantinean woman, a man finds it truly worthwhile to live, as he contemplates essential beauty.¹⁰⁹

On a deeper level, erotic longing, particularly for the beautiful, is said to represent the desire to achieve completeness or wholeness. As Allan Bloom has put it in his analysis of the Symposium: "Eros is desire and . . . one desires only what one lacks."¹¹⁰ In other words, Eros is that desire which is born by the recognition of incompleteness, and the corresponding desire to be complete. In this highest sense of the term, Eros represents the desire for the beautiful which ultimately seeks the perfection that humans lack in this imperfect world. This teaching is not inconsistent with our common sense awareness of the effect of beauty. Only those determined to follow the analysis of modern scientific reductionism would deny the intimations of completeness, even eternity, brought on by the experience of the beautiful. Certainly pre-moderns such as Wordsworth, to cite but one example, were fully attuned to beauty's power:

¹⁰⁸ THE NEW OXFORD AMERICAN DICTIONARY 573 (2d ed. 2005).

¹⁰⁹ Plato's Symposium, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1967 edition. W.R.M. Lamb trans. 211c 1-211d4.

¹¹⁰ BLOOM, *supra* note 6, at 498.

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth . . .¹¹¹

Is the erotic Romeo also a lover of the beautiful in the sense just described?

It is clear Romeo has many excellent qualities that compare as favorably, if not more favorably, to any other major figure in the play. Even his enemy, Capulet, acknowledges his reputation throughout Verona as a gentlemanly young man: “And, to say truth, Verona brags of him / To be a virtuous and well-governed youth.”¹¹² The friendships of men like Benvolio and Mercutio also speak well of Romeo. Mercutio clearly intends, in his confrontation with Tybalt, to save his friend even if it costs Mercutio his own life.¹¹³ As to intellectual ability, Romeo is the superior even of clever Mercutio. In their battle of wits, Mercutio acknowledges defeat: “Come between us, good Benvolio! / My wits faint.”¹¹⁴ Thus, while Romeo may justly earn Mercutio’s mockery because he is a “madman” in his all-consuming preoccupation with love, he is not to be simply dismissed as a man without superior qualities.

Romeo recognizes that participation in Verona’s public life offers little more than attachment to the petty quarrels of noble families nursing “ancient grudge[s],” the causes of which are no longer even remembered.¹¹⁵ He has

¹¹¹ WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour. July 13, 1798, in THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE 157 (W.W. Norton & Co., Inc. 1970).

¹¹² SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.1.67-68.

¹¹³ Mercutio knows that Tybalt intends to kill Romeo and will likely succeed. In order to save his friend, Mercutio attempts to divert Tybalt’s anger toward himself and away from Romeo, only to have Romeo’s intervention in his efforts lead to his own death.

¹¹⁴ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.4.66-67.

¹¹⁵ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at Prologue, 3.

“heard it all.”¹¹⁶ Neither is he interested in the life of detached cynicism represented by Mercutio. Friar Laurence encourages him to embrace another kind of life available to those who inhabit his Christian state: the life of philosophic contemplation.¹¹⁷ None of these alternatives appeal to Romeo’s youthful and erotic soul.

Romeo is certainly an erotic soul by nature. But if his extreme love of love were solely, or decidedly the product of his unique nature, then Romeo would truly be Mercutio’s “madman.” And there would be nothing to learn about the nature of love from madmen. Accordingly, and as has been suggested earlier, his eroticism is influenced by the state of civic life in Verona as well. This essay has argued that Verona’s civic life, in turn, results from the Catholic Church’s intrusion into the political realm and corresponding abdication of its proper role in the tending of the spiritual needs of its flock, as well as the Church’s refusal to grant to the political virtues their proper dignity. Romeo rejects the shallow, unsatisfying life offered by Veronese politics in favor of the life of erotic love. And Romeo’s contempt for the world as he sees it only makes his turn to erotic love all the more extreme.

Ultimately, Romeo’s eroticism leads him to love what he believes love promises more than he loves Juliet as an actual person. Moments before seeing Juliet at the Capulet party and falling hopelessly in “love” with her, he was just as hopelessly in “love” with Rosaline.¹¹⁸ But it is the ladies’ beauty that truly moves Romeo’s heart. While he knows absolutely nothing of Juliet’s character, her beauty moves him to “love” her: “[d]id my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight / For I ne’er saw true beauty till this night.”¹¹⁹ In Romeo’s eyes, Juliet represents a “Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear.”¹²⁰ It is a form of beauty that for Romeo far transcends the lowly things of this world. As with his “love” of Rosaline, just prior to his being captured by Juliet’s beauty, Romeo was hopelessly under the spell of Rosaline’s beauty: “O, she is rich in beauty; only poor / That, when she dies, with beauty dies her store.”¹²¹

Romeo’s friend, Benvolio, knows physical beauty by itself cannot sustain any serious form of love and so correctly predicts that the object of

¹¹⁶ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.1.172.

¹¹⁷ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.3.54–56.

¹¹⁸ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.5.52.

¹¹⁹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.5.52–53.

¹²⁰ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.5.46.

¹²¹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.1.213 – 214.

Romeo's erotic desire will prove quite changeable: "Tut! You saw her fair, none else being by, / Herself poised with herself in either eye; / But in that crystal scales let there be weighed / Your lady's love against some other maid / That I will show you shining at this feast, / And she shall scant show well that now seems best."¹²² While doing exactly as Benvolio forecasts by easily replacing his obsession with Rosaline's beauty with that of Juliet, Romeo never comes to understand his own fickleness. Even upon his (mistaken) discovery of Juliet's death at play's end, much of Romeo's heartbreak is expressed in the form of a poetic figuration of a battle between Juliet's beauty and death itself: "Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath, / Hath no power yet upon thy beauty. / Thou are not conquered. Beauty's ensign yet / Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks, / And death's pale flag is not advanced there."¹²³ The Chorus' sarcastic appraisal of the fickle quality of Romeo's love provides a stark contrast to his beautiful speeches at the Capulet party that immediately precede the appraisal:

Now old desire doth in his deathbed lie,
And young affection gapes to be his heir;
That fair for which love groaned for and would die,
With tender Juliet matched, is now not fair.
Now Romeo is beloved and loves again,
Alike bewitched by the charm of looks¹²⁴

Romeo's erotic love is engaged above all by the physical beauty he sees first in Rosaline, and later in Juliet. To a certain extent, then, Romeo remains on the lower rung of Diotima's ladder of love. But Juliet's perfect beauty—a beauty which is "for earth too dear"—also represents for Romeo the desire for completeness or perfection that he finds so lacking in Verona.

Romeo's conception of love and beauty, however, is also influenced by his Christian religion. Christianity teaches the superiority of love to all other things.¹²⁵ Love is the fundamental stuff of existence, the sum and substance of all that is highest, best, and most beautiful in heaven and on earth; it is

¹²² SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.2.96 -101.

¹²³ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.3.92 – 96.

¹²⁴ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.1–6.

¹²⁵ 1 Cor. 13:13.

God Himself.¹²⁶ The merely human pales by comparison, as the world is full of sin and perishable:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust in his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.¹²⁷

The centrality accorded love in the teaching of Romeo’s Christian faith is consistent with the importance of love to a naturally erotic soul such as Romeo. But Juliet too is a Christian, and her understanding of love assumes a firmer, more grounded form than Romeo’s. Is it the case that Romeo interprets his faith’s teaching in a manner different from Juliet’s understanding? What in the Christian teaching about love may lend itself to the excesses we find in the kind of love Romeo comes to embrace?

In addition to the verses just cited from 1 John—which appear to demean worldly things when compared with God’s glory—there is an antinomian strain in Scripture that suggests the law is unneeded or superfluous for the believer. This strain is particularly evident in St. Paul’s teaching in Romans.¹²⁸ The law is superfluous for believers because God’s Grace has conquered sin in their hearts—those who do not sin do not need the law: “For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.”¹²⁹ As will be argued, Romeo’s conception of love is similarly lawless in that it transcends the things of this world. Juliet’s beauty represents the saving grace that will deliver Romeo from his despair. Romeo’s love reflects that train in Christianity that offers the fulfillment of an antinomian erotic longing.

As discussed earlier, there is also a significant aspect of Christian doctrine that counsels respect for the things properly belonging to Caesar. This interpretation of Scripture’s teaching on Mercy does not appear consistent with that of Friar Laurence or the Prince, but it is arguably more in line with

¹²⁶ 2 Cor. 13:11, 1 John 4: 16.

¹²⁷ 1 John 2:15 - 17.

¹²⁸ Romans 3:19 – 23, 4:13 – 15, 6:14, 10:4.

¹²⁹ Romans 6:14.

traditional notions of justice. Friar Laurence, Romeo's spiritual advisor and the Catholic Church's agent, however, would rather control what belongs to Caesar than render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. Justice is Caesar's, but the friar will seek to supplant traditional notions of justice with his own understanding, based on love and mercy. Once the influence of Friar Laurence comes to dominate the spiritual landscape, Eros is left without an alternative to otherworldly attachments. The comings and goings of this world have largely lost their charm. Accordingly, the particular form of love Romeo comprehends reflects contempt for the things of this world—Juliet's "[b]eauty" is "too rich for use, for earth too dear."¹³⁰

Romeo's erotic imagination is thoroughly shaped by Christian images. His first expressions about and to Juliet at the Capulet party include more than occasional references to heavenly things: they are a veritable love prayer containing repeated references to holy Christian themes and symbols. Juliet is a "dear saint," and her hand is a "holy shrine."¹³¹ The touch of her hand will "make blessed my rude hand."¹³² His own lips are "two blushing pilgrims," which stand ready to "pray" by kissing Juliet, "lest faith turn to despair."¹³³ When Romeo does kiss her, he pronounces that it is his "prayer's effect I take."¹³⁴ The kiss, rather than true prayer, removes sin: "Thus from my lips, by thine my sin is purged."¹³⁵ In the transport of Romeo's erotic imaginings, Juliet figuratively assumes the role Christianity reserves for Christ. In the famous balcony scene, Romeo continues his worship of Juliet. She is a "dear saint" a "bright angel" a "winged messenger of heaven" whose eyes are two "of the fairest stars in all the heaven."¹³⁶ Again, Romeo alludes to Juliet's capacity to absolve him of sin through her love: "[c]all me but love, and I'll be new baptized / Henceforth I never will be Romeo."¹³⁷ These religiously laden love speeches are more than poetic excess or hyperbole. For Romeo, love becomes a religious transport by which he may escape the limitations of this poor world and is divorced from any form of earthly wisdom: "[l]ove goes toward love as schoolboys from

¹³⁰ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.5.47. Romeo displays his contempt for earthly life throughout the play. See, e.g., SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.4.110; 5.1.62; 5.1.81; 5.3.112.

¹³¹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.5.103, 94.

¹³² SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.5.51.

¹³³ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.5.95, 104.

¹³⁴ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.5.105.

¹³⁵ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.5.107.

¹³⁶ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.5.107, at 2.2.57, 26, 28, 15.

¹³⁷ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.2.51–52.

their books / But love from love, toward school with heavy looks.”¹³⁸ As noted earlier, Romeo rejects the consolation of philosophy and its insights.

When confronted with the Prince’s banishment decree, Romeo violently rejects the sentence because it separates him from Juliet. Juliet’s presence constitutes heaven itself: “[h]eaven is here / Where Juliet lives.”¹³⁹ Even carrion flies “steal immortal blessings from her lips.”¹⁴⁰ Juliet represents immortality in Romeo’s eyes. As for the word “banishment,” the “damned use that word in hell / Howling attends it.”¹⁴¹ Of course, for Christians the damned use the word “banishment” because they are forever separated from God’s presence. Later Romeo muses on a dream in which “I dreamt my lady came and found me dead / ... and breathed such life with kisses in my lips / That I revived and was an emperor.”¹⁴² Once again, Romeo substitutes Juliet for divine love, for Christ.

Romeo’s contempt for the world and worldly wisdom that shapes his longing for a trans-political life of idealized love brings him perilously close to nihilism.¹⁴³ When he learns of his love’s apparent death he has no recourse to any form of reasoned understanding, and he declares, “I defy you stars!”¹⁴⁴ The radical disjunction, in Romeo’s mind, between earthly life and heavenly love necessarily rejects any intelligible compatibility between the two, pushing him toward nihilistic despair. In his own words, Romeo is “life-weary”¹⁴⁵ and ready to escape “[f]rom this world-wearied flesh”¹⁴⁶ which bears the burden of a fate that is at best indifferent to his sufferings (“the yoke of inauspicious stars.”¹⁴⁷) Romeo abandons consideration of eternal life, choosing instead to make the tomb he shares with Juliet his place of “everlasting rest.”¹⁴⁸

Moreover, by choosing the trans-political life of love, Romeo partially emulates Friar Laurence when the Franciscan seeks to resolve Verona’s factionalism through a resort to love. Tybalt represents the continuation of

¹³⁸ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.2.157–158.

¹³⁹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.3.29–30.

¹⁴⁰ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.3.37.

¹⁴¹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.3.47–48.

¹⁴² SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.1.6–9.

¹⁴³ The rejection of all religious and moral principles, often in the belief that life is meaningless. THE NEW OXFORD AMERICAN DICTIONARY 1151 (2d ed. 2005).

¹⁴⁴ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.1.24.

¹⁴⁵ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.1.62.

¹⁴⁶ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.3.112.

¹⁴⁷ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.3.111.

¹⁴⁸ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.3.110.

this factionalism more acutely than any character in the play. While Mercutio understands that the only effective way to deal with Tybalt is to defeat him by means of force, Romeo seeks to overcome Tybalt's hatred through love. Romeo interferes in the fight between Mercutio and Tybalt, leading to Tybalt's stabbing Mercutio under Romeo's arm. This is well-meaning foolishness on Romeo's part, brought on by the secret marriage which causes Romeo to try to placate his implacable new kinsman. In so doing, Romeo has (momentarily) become servant to the friar's plan, seeking to quench political discord by appeals to love: "I do protest I never injured thee / But love thee better than thou canst devise / Till thou shalt know the reason of my love / And so, good Capulet, which name I tender / As dearly as my own, be satisfied."¹⁴⁹ Mercutio blames his friend for his death: "[w]hy the devil came you between us? / I was hurt under your arm."¹⁵⁰ Foreshadowing the friar's explanation to the Prince concerning his role in the events that led to the deaths at the tomb, Romeo can only reply: "I thought all for the best."¹⁵¹ Both intended that love rule over discord, and both brought more death because of their good intentions. The similarity between Romeo and the friar ends there, for apart from the fight with Tybalt, Romeo is not interested in resolving political problems. Rather, he is interested in transcending them altogether.

This essay argues that Prince Escalus, Friar Laurence, and Romeo suffer from the Church's misguided teaching on love. But it is one thing for Shakespeare to draw our attention to the pre-reformation Church's distortion of the proper relationship between human and divine love. It is quite another to discern in *Romeo & Juliet* a blueprint for a healthy model of that relationship. In the character of Juliet, however, the outlines of such a model may be found.

Juliet: Christian Love Reconsidered

In *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis considered and contrasted Eros and Christian Love.¹⁵² According to Lewis, the highest form of love is Christian Charity, followed in descending order by Eros, Friendship and, finally,

¹⁴⁹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.1.67–71.

¹⁵⁰ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.1.100–01.

¹⁵¹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.1.102.

¹⁵² C.S. LEWIS, *THE FOUR LOVES* (Harcourt Brace & Co. 1988).

Affection. Eros, of course, includes sexual attraction and activity.¹⁵³ In fact, according to Lewis, sexual union often is a frustrated attempt to realize a more complete union urged upon us by Eros.¹⁵⁴ This frustrating quality of seeking to employ the vehicle of the body to realize something beyond what the body can deliver, however, can assume the form of a transcendent endeavor: “The longing for a union which only the flesh can mediate while the flesh, our mutually excluding bodies, renders it forever unattainable can have the grandeur of a metaphysical pursuit.”¹⁵⁵ To fall prey to this divinization of sexual Eros is to court false gods, Lewis warns, identifying past examples such as “‘the Pagan sacrament’ in sex.”¹⁵⁶ Lewis follows Plato’s classical interpretation of Eros set forth in *The Symposium* insofar as Eros encompasses, but ultimately surpasses mere sexual desire alone: “Sexual desire, without Eros, wants it, the thing in itself; Eros wants the Beloved.”¹⁵⁷ But even though Eros is not irretrievably linked to sex, Lewis maintains, it nevertheless can become a religion of love on its own; and this constitutes yet another form of false religion: “And yet it cannot, just as it stands, be the voice of God Himself. For Eros, speaking with that very grandeur and displaying that very transcendence of self, may urge to evil as well as to good.”¹⁵⁸ Lewis offers the following description of someone who submits to this false religion:

But Eros, honoured without reservation and obeyed unconditionally, becomes a demon. And this is just how he claims to be honoured and obeyed. Divinely indifferent to our selfishness, he is demonically rebellious to every claim of God or man that would oppose him.¹⁵⁹

Lewis’ description comports well with Shakespeare’s depiction of Romeo, and we recognize such rebelliousness when, upon learning of his beautiful Juliet’s (apparent) death, he exclaims: “Then I defy you stars!”¹⁶⁰ As discussed earlier, Romeo’s nihilistic rejection of the laws of God or man are the product of his misguided love honoring and obeying Eros unconditionally. Romeo’s unconditional love of the beauty he sees in Juliet, a love that cannot be sustained because it is attached to something (or someone) perishable, leads to his near demonic rejection of all authority. In

¹⁵³ *Id.* at 91 – 107.

¹⁵⁴ *Id.* at 102.

¹⁵⁵ *Id.* at 102.

¹⁵⁶ *Id.* at 103

¹⁵⁷ *Id.* at 94.

¹⁵⁸ LEWIS, *supra* note 152, at 108.

¹⁵⁹ LEWIS, *supra* note 152, at 110.

¹⁶⁰ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.1.24.

the classical understanding of Eros, Romeo fails to reach beyond personal beauty to that “study which is concerned with the beautiful itself and that alone.”¹⁶¹ In the understanding of Christian love presented by C.S. Lewis, Romeo has settled on worshipping a false god, and so cannot arrive at the highest of loves, Charity, or the love of God himself.¹⁶²

In Juliet, unlike in Friar Laurence or in Romeo, Shakespeare presents us with a far fairer picture of a love, and in particular, Christian love.¹⁶³ Despite her youth, Juliet’s understanding of love is far deeper and certainly more realistic than Romeo’s. As will be argued, it also conforms more closely to traditional Christian doctrine. Juliet is passionate in her love, but her nature seems more grounded and less given to the erotic excesses that preoccupy the soul of Romeo. Moreover, as a woman of her time, the expectations she entertains of a full and happy life do not include the possibility of honorific political pursuits. Thus she is less likely than Romeo to feel the effects of an emasculated civic life.

Troubled by the difficulties presented by her love for the son of the rival family, Juliet reflects on Romeo’s true nature as opposed to his family identity and expresses her willingness to reject her family for him: “O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo? / Deny thy father and refuse thy name / Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love / And I’ll no longer be a Capulet.”¹⁶⁴ She concludes her famous “[w]hat’s in a name” reverie, however, somewhat unrealistically by refusing to acknowledge the fact of one’s association with a particular family (like one’s association with a particular political order) is an integral part of who one is: “And for thy name, which is no part of thee / Take all myself.”¹⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Juliet, far more than Romeo, is keenly attentive to the true conditions surrounding the course of their future love.

Upon first encountering Romeo at the feast prepared by her father, Juliet gently rebukes Romeo’s passionate overtures by reference to Christian doctrine: “Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much, / Which mannerly devotion shows in this; / For saints have hands that pilgrims’

¹⁶¹ Plato, *Symposium* 211c.

¹⁶² LEWIS, *supra* note 152, at 116.

¹⁶³ Critics have noted the quality of Juliet’s love generally speaking, without, however, identifying its Christian character. See, e.g., DAVID SCOTT KASTAN, *Introduction to WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, ROMEO AND JULIET* 1, 9 (Mario DiGangi ed., Barnes & Noble, Inc. 2007). “In this [Juliet’s] formulation, love no longer involves giving and taking, gaining and losing; instead, it has the miraculous power to produce infinite gain from infinite giving.”

¹⁶⁴ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.2.33–36.

¹⁶⁵ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.2.48–49.

hands do touch, / And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss."¹⁶⁶ Later, she repeatedly draws his attention to the dangers the families' hatred poses to their union.¹⁶⁷ She counters his flowery love speeches with cautions about the difference between true love and "light love," and rejects Romeo's vows of love altogether as insubstantial.¹⁶⁸ Just prior to their actual marriage, Juliet continues to upbraid Romeo gently and rejects his request that they take time to speak lovely words about their "imagined happiness."¹⁶⁹ Reality, not unchecked imagination, forms the foundation for real love: "Conceit, more rich in matter than in words / Brags of his substance, not of ornament."¹⁷⁰ Unlike Romeo, she recognizes that their mutual attraction is "too rash, too unadvised, too sudden / Too like the lightening, which doth cease to be / Ere one can say 'It lightens'."¹⁷¹ Juliet realizes the passionate feelings she and Romeo share do not constitute a mature form of love, but are only a "bud of love" waiting to flower.¹⁷²

In his interpretation of *Measure for Measure*, Harry Jaffa argues that Shakespeare is elucidating the importance of chastity (marital fidelity) as a salutary political principle because it supports strong families. Strong families, in turn, are essential for healthy political communities. The Vienna of *Measure for Measure* is dissolute in large part because it lacks such a political principle:

[In Vienna] we do not see any families. Sexual desire may be sublimated or indulged. But we do not see sexual desire as an extension of self-preservation, and self-preservation extended to include the family, whence it is transformed into patriotism.¹⁷³

In Verona, we do see families, but they do not appear healthy. Instead, they are factional—more concerned with advancing their own interests than those of their children or their country. As noted earlier, David Wagner argues that Romeo and Juliet undertake (without being aware of their

¹⁶⁶ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.5.97–100.

¹⁶⁷ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.2.64–65, 70, 74.

¹⁶⁸ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.2.105, 113, 118.

¹⁶⁹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.6.28.

¹⁷⁰ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.6.31–32.

¹⁷¹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.2.118–120.

¹⁷² SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.2.121.

¹⁷³ HARRY V. JAFFA, *Chastity as a Political Principle: An Interpretation of Shakespeare's Measure for Measure*, in *SHAKESPEARE AS A POLITICAL THINKER* 182 (John Alvis & Thomas G. West eds., Carolina Academic Press 1981).

undertaking) the restoration of the civic order through their marriage based on spousal Eros, rather than the self-interested, patriarchal family ordering. While this is true in part, the erotic foundation of their attachment is only a piece of the puzzle. Juliet is a better Christian than the parents. Immediately after first meeting Romeo, Juliet's thoughts turn to marriage: "If he be married, / My grave is like to be my wedding bed."¹⁷⁴ In the orchard scene with Romeo, she is first to raise the subject of marriage as the proper culmination of their love, and is already planning the particular details of that marriage: "If that thy bent of love be honorable, / Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow, / By one that I'll procure to come to thee, / Where and what time thou wilt perform the rite."¹⁷⁵ She later ties her marriage vows to her faith: "God joined my heart and Romeo's, thou our hands."¹⁷⁶ God's sanction of her marriage vow means everything to Juliet, and only Romeo's death can undo that sanction: "my husband is on earth, my faith in heaven / How shall that faith return again to earth / Unless that husband send it me from heaven / By leaving earth?"¹⁷⁷

When her mother first raises the subject of marriage—even before she meets Romeo—Juliet associates the institution with honor: "It is an honor that I dream not of."¹⁷⁸ After learning she is to marry Paris, Juliet tells Friar Laurence she is willing to kill herself to "live an unstained wife to my sweet husband."¹⁷⁹ Juliet's suicide, otherwise considered a sin, must be understood in the context of her faithful commitment to remain "unstained." Actually, Juliet chooses to become a martyr to her holy vow. For Juliet, "true honor" and honorable action are associated with fidelity to holy marriage.¹⁸⁰ Were the cities of Italy populated by marriages made strong and secure by such Juliets, they would contribute toward the formation of healthy, patriotic political communities. The weak and divided Italy of Romeo and Juliet cannot sustain such marriages. They must await a different arrangement between church and state.

While aware of the difficulties and shortcomings of their mutual infatuation, Juliet also reveals the depths of her commitment to a love that fulfills her faith's tenets. After meeting Romeo, Juliet recognizes a potential conflict between her infatuation with him and her faith by acknowledging that

¹⁷⁴ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.5.134 - 35.

¹⁷⁵ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.2.143 - 146.

¹⁷⁶ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 4.1.55.

¹⁷⁷ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 3.5.207–210.

¹⁷⁸ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.3.66.

¹⁷⁹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 4.1.88.

¹⁸⁰ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 4.1.65.

Romeo has become “the god of my idolatry.”¹⁸¹ Juliet’s reference to “idolatry” precedes her moving testimony of the nature of her love for Romeo. Her testimonial reflects an understanding of love that is far more in keeping with Christian teaching than is Romeo’s erotic preoccupation: “And yet I wish but for the thing I have / My bounty is as boundless as the sea / My love as deep; the more I give to thee / The more I have, for both are infinite.”¹⁸² While tempering her love for Romeo with an awareness of it possibly becoming idolatrous, Juliet’s heart bears a Christian stamp whereby she receives more by giving more. The universalism of her Christian love is reflected in Juliet’s willingness to leave Italy and follow Romeo “throughout the world.”¹⁸³ Notably, the Chorus does not subject Juliet’s love to the degree of sarcasm it had leveled at Romeo’s “young affection.”¹⁸⁴

In Juliet’s attitude toward love, then, we find something approaching Lewis’ depiction of the highest form of Christian love—Charity. Specifically, Juliet’s claim that her love is defined by its character as a gift knowing neither limit nor bound resembles Lewis’ description of Charity as “Gift-love.”¹⁸⁵ Lewis identifies this “Gift-love” with the very essence of God’s being: “God is love. Again, ‘Herein is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us’ (1 John IV, 10) . . . We begin at the real beginning, with love as the Divine energy. This primal love is Gift-love. In God there is no hunger that needs to be filled, only plenteousness that desires to give.”¹⁸⁶ Juliet’s love partakes of this kind of “Gift-love” to a far greater degree than does Romeo. The defining character of Romeo’s love is not that of giving. Instead, Romeo leaves us with the clear impression of an estranged youth, consumed with the desire to possess beauty at all costs as a way to relieve his tormented soul.

Finally, both Friar Laurence and Juliet are attentive to Christ’s admonition as set forth in Matthew:

You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He

¹⁸¹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.2.115.

¹⁸² SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.2.132–35.

¹⁸³ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.2.148.

¹⁸⁴ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2 Cho.1 – 14.

¹⁸⁵ Lewis, *supra* note 152, at 126.

¹⁸⁶ Lewis, *supra* note 152, at 126.

causes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.¹⁸⁷

Juliet follows the admonition on the private, rather than the political, level. The friar's Christian solution is doomed to failure on the level of the city, but not necessarily on the personal level, although Juliet is aware of the great difficulty associated with loving an enemy Montague: "Prodigious birth of love it is to me / That I must love a loathed enemy."¹⁸⁸

Whereas Friar Laurence seeks to impose this Christian rule of love on the city, Juliet seeks to follow the rule as a guide to her own life. Due to the circumstances confronting Romeo and Juliet, she will not live to enjoy her love. There can be little doubt, however, of the attractiveness of the lovers' decision, or the pity Shakespeare means his audience to experience when they die, concluding, in fact, that there never was "a story of more woe." In light of her faithful commitment to her Romeo—her true love—rather than to an arranged marriage, Juliet lives on as an exemplar of marital fidelity. This is a Christian message, it seems, to which Shakespeare would have his audience attend.

The families must be strong if the city is to be strong. Juliet would embrace Christian love by choosing to love Romeo for who he truly is (that "dear perfection to which he owes"), rather than according to his family name. Once she has chosen according to true love, she will bind that love in honorable Christian marriage, and will follow her love "throughout the world."¹⁸⁹ Moreover, she will kill herself before she will allow that holy union to be violated. It is Juliet's honorable determination to remain chaste that forces Friar Laurence to adopt the resurrection plan. The friar understands Juliet's determination and he respects it. Of course, he is also concerned with how her death may reveal his role in bringing about this situation. He seeks to employ the example of Christ's death, reproduced through Juliet, to save Juliet and to reconcile the families. However, it requires the actual, not feigned, death of Juliet to accomplish this. Juliet's self-sacrifice in the name of Christian love and marriage will prevail as the example that lives on. The problem of future Romeos has not been resolved. That resolution, it seems, requires a teaching on the proper roles of earthly and divine love. Such a teaching will help bring about a restoration of civic virtue such that the erotic, spirited youth of a future Verona may avoid the "mis-adventured" fate of Romeo.

¹⁸⁷ Matthew 5.43–45 (The New international Version).

¹⁸⁸ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 1.5.139–140.

¹⁸⁹ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 2.2.148.

Conclusion: Beyond Verona's Walls

Depending upon the interpretation provided, Christian doctrine concerning love can influence erotic love in significantly different ways. After all, erotic love can produce disastrous results apart from any specific Christian influence. Indeed, Romeo and Juliet are not the only couple whose names form the title of a Shakespearean play.¹⁹⁰ Antony and Cleopatra is the other such couple, and the similarities between the two couples—and more importantly—their differences, are instructive in discerning Shakespeare's teaching on divine and human love. In considering their similarities, we see that Antony and Cleopatra seek to retreat into a purely private realm of all-consuming erotic love once the republic has been replaced by the empire such that political life offers no compelling reason to remain interested in matters of a political or patriotic nature. Romeo and Juliet do the same. Both couples (although less so with Juliet) come to see their love as above the merely human, as partaking of, or approaching the sacred.¹⁹¹ This, C.S. Lewis argues, is the inevitable tendency of Eros: "Of all loves he is, at his height, most god-like; therefore most prone to demand our worship. Of himself he always tends to turn 'being in love' into a sort of religion."¹⁹² In the end, the desperation that is largely brought on by the fact that the lives they have chosen cannot be sustained drives Antony and Cleopatra to commit suicide. The fates of Romeo and Juliet are similar. These significant similarities are meant to highlight the deficiencies of a singular devotion to erotic love that has become unmoored from the broader context of life, which context requires that love be integrated with, rather than isolated from the responsibilities and purposes necessarily connected with the civic responsibilities attendant upon political life. But the broader political and religious forces that help shape the couples' ultimately disastrous decisions are quite dissimilar. These differences are at least as instructive as the similarities.

In the opening scene of *Antony and Cleopatra*, we encounter Antony demanding that the world acknowledge that the love he and Cleopatra share is beyond compare: "The nobleness of life / Is to do thus; when such a mutual pair / And such a twain can do't, in which I bind / On pain of

¹⁹⁰ There is also *The History of Troilus and Cressida*.

¹⁹¹ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Antony and Cleopatra*, in WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: THE COMPLETE WORKS 1.1.17; 1.3.35-37; 2.6.17 (Alfred Harbage ed., The Viking Press 1977).

¹⁹² Lewis, *supra* note 152, at 110-111.

punishment, the world to weet / We stand up peerless.”¹⁹³ The superiority of their love is far beyond what others can comprehend. Lesser forms of love are contemptible in this regard: “There’s beggary in the love that can be reckoned.”¹⁹⁴ Cleopatra is no less ready to speak of the god-like quality of their love: “Eternity was in our lips and eyes, / Bliss in our brows’ bent; none our parts so poor / But was a race of heaven.”¹⁹⁵

Antony and Cleopatra want the world to stand back in awe and admiration of their love. In this sense their love is a means to achieve ever greater fame and glory. It is self-absorbed in the extreme. John Alvis has aptly summarized the love that Antony and Cleopatra embrace as “bidding for glory by cultivating a good consisting in nothing beyond the benefit of two, Antony and Cleopatra attempt a tour de force of self-glorification more daring than plausible.”¹⁹⁶

Unlike Antony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet are wholly indifferent to worldly praise. Why do Romeo and Juliet not seek the kind of celebrity or public acclaim as recognition of the unique character of their love that Antony and Cleopatra find so desirable? What distinguishes the two couples? One difference immediately comes to mind: Romeo and Juliet are Christians, Antony and Cleopatra are not. Christianity’s foundational teaching on humility and the sin of pride frowns upon such self-promotion, while encouraging personal devotion to God. Likewise, the first two commandments require a self-renunciation in favor of God and neighbors, rather than a self-aggrandizement. Hence, Romeo and Juliet revere love itself, but are not disposed by the influence of their faith to do so in a manner that results in a desire for public recognition and acclaim for the wondrous quality of their love. We see then in both of Shakespeare’s loving couples an abstracted, other-worldly erotic love that, while assuming different forms, shares a common disdain for political worlds that offer no attractions to their souls.

Verona has achieved its “glooming peace,” but what form of decent city must depend upon guilt-producing death to remind its citizens of their sinfulness as a means to suppress the more destructive human passions? Moreover, there is nothing in the uncertain peace that assures us that the underlying causes of Verona’s political ills—its factional discord and

¹⁹³ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 191, at 1.1.36-40.

¹⁹⁴ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 191, at 1.1.15.

¹⁹⁵ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 191, at 1.3.35-37.

¹⁹⁶ ALVIS, *supra* note 27, at 170.

absence of civic virtue and patriotism—have been dealt with. After all, Friar Laurence and his Church remain politically authoritative in the city.

As we have seen, Friar Laurence is not without his admirable qualities, particularly in his sound instruction to Romeo regarding his unmanly and fickle “dotting.” However, like the Church he represents, his actions fall disproportionately short of his faith’s teaching. They do so primarily because he, like Rome, distorts this teaching by using it to advance political rather than spiritual ends. In showing us both these aspects of Friar Laurence, along with the admirable example of faithful Juliet, Shakespeare clearly points us toward a political community that both rejects the use of Christian doctrine as a tool to shape and ultimately control the political landscape—whether through love and mercy or consciousness of sin—and offers a more hopeful political model. This model incorporates Christian teaching and virtues in such a way that they help shape individual souls, forming the basis for strong families that, in turn, form strong, patriotic political communities.

Weinberger argues that the problem Shakespeare exposes in this play is that of an enfeebled political order, bereft of civic virtue and patriotism. This is indeed part of the problem. However, in concluding that this problem is the result of “the extraordinary resilience and power of Christian morality,” Weinberger paints with too broad a brush.¹⁹⁷ The issue presented by Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet* is not necessarily the problem of Christianity per se. Rather, the issue is the perversion of Christian doctrines by the Church of Rome seeking to impose the tenets of its faith on political life. Earthly love may well help form the foundation for strong families and, perhaps, open souls to a greater appreciation of divine love. Love cannot, Shakespeare shows us, supplant traditional political teaching regarding the effective means (including brute force) to control and direct the aggressive human passions such as pride, envy, avarice, and ambition. Removing the Catholic Church’s debilitating influence over the political is necessary for a revival of a healthy civic order—one that can attract the interest of the city’s spirited young men. Italy is unlikely to regain the grandeur, magnificence and sense of patriotic purpose that characterized republican Rome. Yet it may rediscover that healthy sense of honorable public spiritedness and respect for the rule of law if the Church abandons its extra-jurisdictional ambitions.

¹⁹⁷ Jerry Weinberger, *Pious Princes and Red-Hot Lovers: The Politics of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet**, 65 *J. POL.* 350, 374 (2003).

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare presents to us a potential danger posed by Christianity when the proper roles of love and the law are confused. The friar would have love rule in the city, effectively supplanting traditional notions of law and justice. The result is greater death and destruction than would likely have occurred if the Prince had carried out what the law commanded, if he had heeded his own advice that “mercy murders” when it “pardon[s] those that kill.” The antinomian character of the Church’s teaching on love, moreover, represents another cause for concern. Romeo would have nothing other than love rule in his heart. In so doing, he becomes its slave and loses his sense of manhood. The dangerous qualities of this antinomian aspect of Christian doctrine may be endemic to the faith, or it may be a misinterpretation of Christian doctrine proper. It is the argument of this essay that Shakespeare’s depiction of Juliet lends force to the latter interpretation.

Shakespeare’s play about the power of love illuminates both its possibilities and its limitations. It is difficult to discover Shakespeare’s ultimate attitude toward Christianity’s teaching, and it is not the intent of this essay to argue that he offers the character of Juliet in order to instruct us about the superiority of Christian love. But Shakespeare does seem, at least, to offer a healthier form of that love given the fact of Christianity’s having come to dominate the understanding of love in Western Civilization. In the end, *Romeo and Juliet* points not only to the superiority of the proper separation of church and state, but also toward the possibility of an honorable Christianity that can exist alongside and support a vibrant political community. *Romeo and Juliet* presents us with the spectacle of the interplay of Eros, Christian love, and political life. In so doing, Shakespeare does not provide definitive answers to the perennial tensions this interplay necessarily entails. But in revealing the failures and partial successes of the players and their fates, Shakespeare does provide the attentive reader with a rich beginning toward understanding “the true ground of all these piteous woes.”¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁸ SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 1, at 5.3.180.