Plants: Life and Death Dichotomy in *Romeo and Juliet*

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Humanity has innate and intimate connections to the plant world, the significance of which is sometimes overlooked. People know instinctually that plants are important, but the ubiquity of plants on Earth, in literature and in life, can form a barrier to deeper analysis. Humans might benefit by examining the trees within the forest a little more closely (instead of the other way around). William Shakespeare certainly did not ignore the links between humanity and the flora of the world. Plants play a crucial role in the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*, and Shakespeare wrote deep complexity into this presence; the herbs, both beneficial and poisonous, contain within themselves extreme ambivalence that must be intentional on the playwright’s part after accounting for cultural context.

At its heart, the ambivalence plants exhibit is simple, because plants are literally, physically life and death. The human body needs them for sustenance, yet ingesting the wrong plant can be fatal. Cultures grew because of their ability to cultivate crops, and cultures failed when their agricultural systems became unsustainable. Therefore, plants represent much more than their basic nutritional qualities. When harvests are plentiful people are prosperous, and when famines occur people struggle to live. Because of this, plants are intertwined with religion, because oftentimes when people struggle they seek help from the divine. The Bible reads, “If thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the LORD thy God … Blessed shall be … the fruit of thy ground” (King James Version, Deuteronomy 28.1-4). However, if one does not follow the commandments of the Lord, “Thou shalt carry much seed out into the field, and shalt gather but little in; for the locust shall consume it. Thou shalt plant vineyards, and dress them, but shalt neither drink of the wine, nor gather the grapes; for the worms shall eat them” (Deuteronomy 28.38-39). Here a person’s well-being is so dependent on plants that the ways in which God rewards and punishes are through harvests, important in both a religious and a practical sense.

Plants are both medicine and poison—they can cure or kill. Twentieth-century theorist Jacques Derrida argues that the dichotomy between remedy and poison is deeply ingrained even within language itself (125). In his essay entitled “Plato’s Pharmacy,” he uses the following translation from Plato’s Laws to prove it: “This is the malady in them all for which law must find a pharmakon. Now it is a sound old adage that it is hard to fight against two enemies at once—even when they are enemies from opposite quarters. We see the truth of this in medicine and elsewhere” (qtd. in Derrida 125). In other words, sometimes a cure is a remedy, and sometimes a cure is not actually a cure but a harmful drug. Also, sometimes the only way to cure is to cause harm. For example, chemotherapy is a contemporary method of destroying cancer cells but necessarily killing healthy cells in the process. Therefore, the presence of plants does not always equate to happiness. When people are sick, they reach for cures, and historically most such cures were herbs. Unfortunately, situations arise in which reaching for a remedy is ineffective.
In the sixteenth century, and certainly around the time of Romeo and Juliet, the plague was an unstoppable force in England. “The best modern estimates of the death rate in England during the first outbreak of plague cluster between 40% and 55%—which give a probable average mortality of around 47% or 48%. In other words nearly half the population of England died in something like 18 months” (Horrox 3). There was simply no cure and no way to escape. In 1626, well after Shakespeare wrote Romeo and Juliet but still relevant, John Donne wrote that the plague “shall not be only uncurable, uncontrollable, unexorable, but indisputable, unexaminable, unquestionable; A plague that shall not only not admit a remedy, when it is come, but not give a reason how it did come” (369). The plague came, and there was no remedy, no miracle, no magical fix, but were people just supposed to accept this fact and give up hope?

No, absolutely not, because when people are confronted with a hopeless situation they desperately seek a remedy. England’s leadership understood this desperation, because Queen Elizabeth published a list of potential cures that includes many plants to try in every possible circumstance and stage of infection. She writes that the “root of butterbur” is “a general medicine for all sorts of people taken with the plague, to be had without cost” (196). The medical marketplace in London was full of sources of medicine; physicians, priests, apothecaries, and surgeons were all present, but there were also, according to Rebecca Laroche, “midwives, gentlewomen practitioners, housewives, herbwomen, wisewomen, witches, [and] empirics” (2).

The main purveyors of medical advice oftentimes competed against one another. Established in 1540, the Royal College of Physicians became increasingly agitated by the power of the apothecaries who were still allied to the Grocers’ Guild until the early seventeenth century. During the late-sixteenth century, the College began to exert control over who could and could not practice as an apothecary, partly because they were worried about their own professional standing and partly because there undoubtedly were a considerable number of fraudsters. (Hunter 174)

Hunter goes so far as to say that Romeo and Juliet “is a play overtly about contesting models of medical discourse and the relationships between medicine and rhetoric that were preoccupying English practices in the 1590s” (171). Perhaps Shakespeare knew that while people were bombarded with potential cures, they also turned to literature as an escape and a source of hope. Totaro describes the function of Shakespeare and other writers during plague times: “By representing the plague for their audiences, these writers made an epidemic calamity intelligible: for them, the dreaded disease could signify despair but also hope, bewilderment but also a divine plan, quarantine but also liberty, death but also new life” (9). Romeo and Juliet is heavily influenced by the plague and its effects on society and culture. Any audience attending the original performances would have had firsthand knowledge of the devastation. Shakespeare wrote the play in 1596—
the same year that “the Privy Council closed the London theatres to stop the spreading of the plague” (Weis 34). Constant plague-related imagery is woven into Romeo and Juliet, including the themes of quarantine, fear of infection, and lives of the young being cut short, as well as a general sense of a too-intimate connection with Death personified.

Shakespeare’s audience understood the ramifications of plague and all the attendant effects it had on society. Perhaps a man watching the two lovers on stage knew the pain of losing the woman with which he was in love, or perhaps another audience member had gone to a monk in desperate search of an herbal cure for his ailing child. The audience knew that even a beneficial plant can cause harm, and they believed that some poisonous plants could cure. Shakespeare clearly understood the concept of life and death dichotomy. Plants and their relationships to health play a prominent role in the plot of the play, and they are represented in fully developed, paradoxical ways as both cures and poisons. Juliet is given what she believes is the cure to her situation in a vial, but it makes her appear so lifeless that Romeo kills himself, causing Juliet to do the same. Romeo visits an apothecary and obtains the fatal liquid that he views as “cordial and not poison” (V.i.85). Both Romeo and Juliet are in situations from which they desperately seek a cure, and they both try herbal remedies. The remedies they seek, however, are fatal.

A 1596 audience would have recognized this desperation as a corollary to seeking cures for the plague. Cures, medicines, and miracles are fervently sought when a person is infected by a fatal sickness or surrounded by the utter horrors of disease. Plants as cures embodied hope in plague times, but imagine how heartbreaking it would have been to know or suspect that any medicine one tried would prove useless. When viewed this way, the plant imagery in the play becomes especially poignant to any audience, because the futility of fighting the plague and the hopelessness of the situation is highlighted. However, despite the hopelessness of reality, Shakespeare wrote much hope into the play; even though the lovers die, they live together eternally (in the afterlife, in the tomb, and as statues) and bring peace to Verona. To put it succinctly, Shakespeare and his audience were so heavily influenced by the effects of plague on society and individuals that plants are transformed in Romeo and Juliet from simple, hopeful cures into a highly complex representation of the dichotomies of life and death, which signify both hope and futility.

The plants in Romeo and Juliet do indeed represent both life and death, as well as sickness and health, and the play relies heavily on this structure. For example, after Romeo realizes he has fallen in love with a Capulet, Romeo goes to Friar Laurence to express his sadness and seek counsel. Before Romeo enters the scene, the monk stands alone with a basket and proclaims the following:

Now, ere the sun advance his burning eye
The day to cheer and night’s dank dew to dry,
I must up-fill this osier cage of ours
With baleful weeds and precious-juiced flowers.
The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb,
What is her burying grave, that is her womb;

(2.3.1-6)

He says that he “must” fill the container with plants; therefore he has a reason for needing these plants on hand. Does he need to procure these plants in order to utilize their medicinal qualities? He “must” acquire these plants, because to not seek them would be tantamount to losing hope. Of course he must retain hope in the plants’ healing properties because to believe otherwise is to acknowledge the futility of trying to delay death amid the plague. What is especially interesting is the several binaries present in these lines. “Day” is contrasted with “night,” “baleful weeds” are contrasted with “precious-juiced flowers,” “womb” is contrasted and rhymed with “tomb,” and the “burning eye” of the sun is contrasted with “dank dew.” The spread of the plague was associated with nighttime and wetness, so the sun’s rays that dry up dew are beneficial to health; the tension between the fire and water elements is evident here.

To continue with the dichotomies, the plants Friar Laurence acquires are both “baleful” and “precious-juiced.” Some of the plants are poisonous and some beneficial, and this phrasing serves to highlight the strong oppositions that Shakespeare built into the play. The “precious-juiced flowers” have such a positive connotation that surely they can be used as medicine, but the negative connotation of the “baleful weeds” is much more complex. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “baleful” means “Full of malign, deadly, or noxious influence; pernicious, destructive, noxious, injurious, mischievous, malignant” (“baleful”). What possible purpose would a man belonging to a religious order gather poisonous herbs? Friar Laurence believes that sometimes medicine must make a patient sick in order to cure. For example, a purgative violently purges the bad humors from the body, thus providing balance and a return to health. Even Queen Elizabeth recommended “medicine purgative” and to “use all means to expel the poison and to defend the heart by Cordials” (193). Friar Laurence’s quoted speech highlights the tense opposition of life and death. The Friar’s herbs represent both sickness and health. The Friar rhymes “womb” with “tomb,” which makes the audience aware of both the negative connotations of death but also the hope and new birth represented by “womb.”

Further along in the plot, Romeo receives news that Juliet has died. The letter that was supposed to alert Romeo to Juliet’s fake death never made it to him because of people’s fear of the plague spreading. Therefore, Romeo decides to buy an herbal mixture to kill himself. The apothecary Romeo visits to obtain poison is further evidence of the tension between plants as life and plants as death. As Romeo states:

I do remember an apothecary,

And hereabouts ‘a dwells, which late I noted,
In tattered weeds, with overwhelming brows,
Culling of simples. Meagre were his looks,
Sharp misery had worn him to the bones,
And in his needy shop a tortoise hung,
An alligator stuffed, and other skins
Of ill-shaped fishes; and about his shelves
A beggarly account of empty boxes,
Green earthen pots, bladders and musty seeds,
Remnants of packthread and old cakes of roses
Were thinly scattered to make up a show.
(5.1.37-48)
The apothecary is not presented as happy and prosperous; he is presented as “needy.” He is in fact so affected by the “sharp misery” of the plague that it has “worn him to the bones.” His shop contains no abundancy of freshly-gathered herbs; instead he has “musty seeds.” Seeds that are “musty” will not sprout or create more life. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word “musty” as “having the faint unpleasant odour of mould; smelling of damp or decay; stale and unaired” (“musty”). In the sixteenth century, people believed that sickness was spread through smells, so the mustiness of these seeds in the apothecary’s shop is particularly condemning. Either he was never a good apothecary in the first place, or his shop has been sold out of potential curatives for a long time. Queen Elizabeth’s advice for potential medicines was posted throughout England.

Certainly an audience bearing witness to the misery of the apothecary shop would feel the pang of unfulfilled hope in the face of sickness. The apothecary has even arranged items within to try to cover up the lack of curatives. Romeo notes the “thinly scattered” “remnants of packthread and old cakes of roses.” The Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of “packthread” is the following: “Strong cord or twine used for sewing or tying up packs or bundles; a piece or length of this” (“packthread”). Therefore, the packthread would have been used when times were more prosperous. “Cakes” and “roses” both have positive-sounding and romantic connotations. The plague negatively impacted the economy and ruined families. These items, when taken in conjunction with the poor apothecary, who is still “beggarly” after the possible influx of customers, represent the devastating attendant effects of plague. The emptiness, uncleanliness, and depressing nature of this building represent the unlikelihood of finding effectual medicine for fighting the plague. Romeo does not seek a cure from this shop; he seeks a poison.

It should be noted that though Romeo and Juliet both seek the aid of Friar Laurence, and Romeo seeks the aid of the poor apothecary, neither character seeks the aid
of Juliet’s nurse Angelica. Women in the home were great sources of medical and herbal information. When the nurse reminisces on Juliet’s younger years she states,

‘Tis since the earthquake now eleven years,
And she was weaned, I never shall forget it,
Of all the days of the year upon that day.
For I had then laid wormwood to my dug,
Sitting in the sun under the dovehouse wall.
My lord and you were then at Mantua.
Nay, I do bear a brain. But as I said,
When it did taste the wormwood on the nipple
Of my dug and felt it bitter, pretty fool,
To see it tetchy and fall out with the dug!
(I.iii.24-33)

The nurse obviously formed a close bond with Juliet, not just because she says she nursed Juliet, but because she took care of Juliet while the parents were “at Mantua.” Another example of dichotomy related to the dual nature of plants is the nurse’s name. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, angelica is “an aromatic umbelliferous plant (A. archangelica, or Archangelica officinalis) indigenous to Europe, and cultivated (since 1568) in England, for culinary or medicinal purposes, and for preparing a confection, ‘Candied Angelica’” (“angelica”). The nurse, therefore shares the name of both medicine and a confection, and she is also the source of the baby’s sustenance, which would seem to indicate pleasantness. The baby seeks the nourishment she needs from the nurse, but then the nurse decides to stop breastfeeding. The baby reaches for what she thinks is her hunger remedy only to be confronted with the bitter taste of wormwood. Thus, to Shakespeare, even a baby is not immune to the harsh reality of herbs. Is this bitter “dug” an indication of Shakespeare’s philosophy on women in the medical marketplace?

The title characters of the play seem to dismiss the nurse completely as a way to achieve their goals. But Friar Laurence and the poor apothecary do not seem effective alternatives. Despite trying to help, the friar completely fails in his mission to cure the situation, and it is because of him that Juliet faked her death, which lead to the characters’ downfalls. Even though the apothecary does not want to sell Romeo the poison, the fact remains that the poison is indeed on hand within the shop. What purpose would the apothecary have for keeping poison in stock, since it is so deadly in small doses?

To Shakespeare’s original, late-sixteenth century audience, the question of which source of medicine to seek was extremely relevant. A person had to seek a cure when confronted with the unrelenting plague outbreaks because to do otherwise was to admit
defeat and accept death. Many indications of the ambivalent nature of plants are present in *Romeo and Juliet*. For example, the nurse asks, “Doth not rosemary and Romeo begin / both with a letter?” (II.iv.198-199) The plant rosemary was used at both weddings and funerals, so this is further evidence of life and death dichotomy built into the play so much that it is part of Romeo’s name (Weis 224). In fact, as Romeo drinks the poison that kills him, he says, “O true apothecary, / Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die” (V.iii.119-120). Weis states that Romeo is using a pun: “quick = alive, that is, the deadly poison transports him to the only life he now craves, a life of death, because Juliet (he believes) has gone there ahead of him” (327). Furthermore, the second to last line of Juliet’s is “to make me die with a restorative” (V.iii.166).

The only way for these characters to remedy the situation is to die, and they knew it, which suggests that the only way to deal with the plague may have been to accept that trying desperately to seek cures would be ineffective. The healers in *Romeo and Juliet* did nothing to help the lovers. Shakespeare understood, in his own way, Derrida’s idea that the dichotomy between remedy and poison is so strong and complex that it is built into language itself. And Plato’s idea that humans “fight against two enemies at once—even when they are enemies from opposite quarters. We see the truth of this in medicine and elsewhere” (qtd. in Derrida 125) is displayed in this speech by Friar Laurence:

> Within the infant rind of this weak flower
> Poison hath residence and medicine power,
> For this, being smelted, with that part cheers each part,
> Being tasted, stays all senses with the heart.
> Two such opposed kings encamp them still

(II.iii.11-26)

The plant here is a small, young flower, but this flower contains both medicine and poison. The “two opposed kings” of the plant world are in the midst of a harsh, never-ending fight, and humans are left in the middle trying to understand the complex nature of the battle. Humanity is so perplexed and influenced by this relationship that this war is embedded in language, literature, and society. Through writing *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare realized this dichotomy and presented it to his audience, with plague as a backdrop, in terms of life and death as well as hope and futility.
Works Cited


