

Three Weddings and Two Funerals

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The Hubble Telescope continues to show us amazing photos of the depths of the universe. Every Saturday, to the delight of John MacLeod, the New York Times' science column presents the latest discoveries of astrophysicists. While they spin elaborate, to me fantastic, theories of the makeup and origin of the universe, one simple truth does shine through: the universe's composition is consistent throughout. I have little doubt that this very night in a galaxy far, far away, the aged gentlemen of a literary club in a fading mid-western city in a bellicose country on the planet Quark are listening to an interesting array of budget papers, brilliantly delivered.

My life will almost certainly end before we make contact with the Quarkian Literary Club, or indeed any extraterrestrial life. But I take great solace in being able to explore a limitless universe here on the home planet. I refer of course to the Bard, William Shakespeare, and his 38 plays of amazing breadth and depth, which taken together explore encyclopedically the depths and frontiers of our nature. There is little time in a budget paper to scratch more than a square inch of the surface of the Bard's universe. Consequently, these remarks concern only a small quadrant of his vision. This will not keep me from extrapolating to some broad generalizations about his work. Like the astrophysicists, I will employ the slightest data (space and time limited as I am) to opine on the contours of Shakespeare's grand, universal vision.

Four works, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Romeo & Juliet*, *Antony & Cleopatra*, and *The Tempest* exemplify Shakespeare's interest in the power and limits of love, his growing skill in depicting it during the course of his career, and his shifting vision of love as his own life waxed and waned.

Shrew presents the first wedding referenced in our title. This early play is an amalgam of three literary strands, Roman comedy, English folklore and the Renaissance courtly love tradition, imperfectly mixed together. Lots of the Roman comedy and the courtly love matter are packed into a pallid under plot involving Kate's sister Bianca and her suitors, wisely given short shrift by directors and audiences alike. There are several marriages there, but they are insignificant for our theme.

The heart of the play, and I use the metaphor deliberately, involves the wooing, wedding and taming of the shrew, Kate, by exuberant, worldly wise Petruchio. Shakespeare was an astute psychologist. He followed folk wisdom in demonstrating that sleep and food deprivation are wonderful tools to bring captives around to your point of view. (This lesson the CIA has learned at Gitmo and Baghdad airport, as did their predecessors in the NKVD during the Stalinist terrors-but I digress.) At any rate, Petruchio uses these tools and a healthy dose of her own ill temper to "tame" Kate. Much ink has been spilt as to whether Kate is really tamed, or simply biding her time for a later offensive in the war of the sexes.

Was Shakespeare a misogynist or an early guerilla feminist? Hard to say, so I retreat to the more assured observation that the instant regard Kate and Petruchio show for each other and their witty banter, within their quickly established limits of what is foul and fair in wooing and taming, is vastly entertaining. Kate and Petruchio have

become icons of Western literature, the play an often performed delight. The bottom line--the wooing of Kate by Petruchio--shows us the curative powers of art, illusion and love to make those affected by it better people.

The play, however, is finally an extended playing out of an old joke tale, and there is not much depth beneath the easy but attractive banter between the two principal lovers. Written a year or two later, *Romeo & Juliet* marks an advance in Shakespeare's art and vision. The play gives us a clandestine wedding and adds an all too public funeral. Set against the civil strife tearing at the heart of Verona, the same setting as *Shrew*, Juliet Capulet and Romeo Montague's love conquers not quite all. Audiences over the centuries have thrilled to the coruscating love scenes between the "star-crossed" lovers. An advance over *Shrew*, the love interest here has not only hormonal but also intellectual content and is set against a back drop of a real social problem. The kids' parents just do not get along.

In their first scene together, at the Capulet's ball, the lovers engage in exquisite word play that has the overtones of religious as well as carnal ecstasy. Calling each other "pilgrim" the young lovers embark on a holy redemptive journey, that is not without humor. After their first kiss, Juliet, certainly the play's central figure, tells young Romeo that he kisses "by the book". Perhaps the book referred to is the Bible; if it is instead a sex manual or even the *Kama Sutra*, Juliet makes sure that Romeo continues to practice, presumably until he gets it right.

The sacredness of the love interest between the "star-crossed" two is set against the social strife of parents who should know better as well as against the religious presence of the enigmatic Friar Lawrence. The good friar is one of the stranger personages in early Shakespeare. While earlier learned divines and pedagogues in Shakespeare were almost always broadly humorous, Friar Lawrence is presented sardonically and ambiguously. While a priest, he seems much too interested in the darker properties of plants and potions. Instead of counseling the two lovers against a match that could only lead to trouble, he serves as co-conspirator, concocting the silly plan that leads to their demise. To top it all off, when alone with Juliet in the crypt where the poor girl has awakened from a drug induced sleep to find her husband apparently dead, the good friar hears a noise and bolts, leaving the girl to jump to the wrong conclusion and bring about her own death.

While much of the play focuses on the wedding that clandestinely brings the two teens together, the end of the play previews their funeral, and is certainly funereal. The acid bitterness of the longstanding hatred between Montague and Capulet has been enough to kill off the lovers, as it has served as a plague on Verona, not just both the houses as the dying Mercutio says, but on the whole body politic.

Against that realization, the play is still positive. What adheres is the constancy of the love of the two young people. While love had been little more than a jest in *Shrew*, here it is vital. It is the force that serves as an antidote to the hatred that turns family against family in daily life.

Our next funeral comes several years later. It would be interesting to know just what trials the aging Shakespeare endured in the fifteen or so years that the turn into the seventeenth century. For in *Antony & Cleopatra* there is no wedding, at least no wedding

on earth between the title characters. They are an older, more fatigued, certainly more flawed couple. Their flames of love had burned to embers years before.

This play has a far wider scope than either of the earlier plays. Now free of the city limits of Verona, our scene is the entire Mediterranean, the known world of the classical scene of this play. The sultry and desultory romance of Antony and Cleopatra plays out against the backdrop of the foundation laying of the Roman Empire, the coup de grace given the Republic by cunning Octavius.

In giving us a picture of love between two middle-aged, world weary and all too imperfect characters, Shakespeare sets them within a correspondingly imperfect world. As Antony charges back and forth between Rome and Roman probity and the sultry Egyptian court of his strumpet queen, we get a dose of power politics as played by the warlord triumvirate of Octavius, Lepidus, and Antony, with the younger Pompey thrown in for good measure. If the play is about love, and it is, there is also a healthy dose of betrayal that tempers the mix.

Living in a corrupt and overripe world, the two central figures are themselves most imperfect, and much of the play is given over to showing them acting the strumpet and the fool, as one of the characters brands them in the opening lines of the play. Of course, that perception is not where the play leaves us, at least in the person of Cleopatra. It is more than interesting in this feminist age, not to mention in these misogynistic precincts, that Cleopatra, like Juliet, shows herself more able and more admirable than the confused, weak willed lover upon whom she throws away her love and her life.

Like Juliet, Cleopatra gets the best lines. After Antony has finally died of his imperfectly self-inflicted wounds, Cleopatra dies the queen she every inch is. It is she who has the inches, not Antony, who falls somewhat short, except in the very love Cleopatra bestows on him. Anxious to join him in death, she calls for her crown, tells us that she is all air and fire, leaving her baser elements behind, and in her immortal longings, tells the bumbling Antony, presumably waiting by the altar in heaven, that she is on her way: "Husband, I come," she regally declares.

Thus she thwarts the shift politician Octavius. As in *Romeo & Juliet* we are left with a picture of love stronger and more memorable than the mundane political events that have caused the lovers' earthly downfall. It is death and evanescence itself that Cleopatra and through her Antony overcome. In taking on the bite of the "worm", the asp that poisons her, Cleopatra shows her aptitude for immortality rather than the diminishing vitality that Shakespeare himself was apparently feeling in writing about world weary and emotionally depleted lovers. No wedding on earth for these two lovers, but a funeral, and a wedding later.

A scene of a far different sort is set in *The Tempest*. Here the world is just as rotten geopolitically as in *Antony & Cleopatra*, but luckily for the central figure, Prospero, sometime Duke of Milan, he is long out of it. Banished to an island by his usurping brother, Prospero has been busy raising his daughter Miranda and preparing for the day when he would return to the Milan he had let slip through his fingers when he was its too bookish ruler.

The last play written totally by the Bard himself, *The Tempest* has an elegiac tone. The love interest, while important is much suppressed. Prospero lures his usurping brother and his companions to the island so that he can find a suitable mate for his daughter Miranda, but also so he can right old wrongs.

Miranda and Ferdinand fall in love as quickly and as irrevocably as any couple in Shakespeare, but without the overt spark of passion that ignites *Romeo & Juliet* and *Antony & Cleopatra*. For the first and probably only time in the Shakespeare Romantic canon, lovers are told to remain chaste until they are married, and they cheerfully follow the proscription. Their union is important, indeed central to the themes of the play, but not as centrally depicted as the efforts of Prospero to help the villains who claimed his Dukedom redeem themselves.

Here at the end of his career, Shakespeare seems more interested in the institution of love than in the longings of specific lovers. And he sets the discourse within the largest scenic context yet. We have gone from a house in *Shrew*, through a larger and strife torn Verona, to the war ravaged Mediterranean basin, and finally to an unnamed island in the Mediterranean, the island a figure of the world itself. And just as the island becomes the world in the play, so Prospero takes on god-like powers in being able to dominate the elements, creating winds and storms. He ultimately rules over the storm of life itself.

We would accuse a lesser artist of solipsism in portraying Prospero not only as a god-like father-figure and magician, but also as the paradigm of the artist. For as Shakespeare most artfully suggests, it is the artist who creates the worlds of love and loss. While anger, death, betrayal, connivance and confusion serve as the backdrop of every one of the love matches in these four plays, it is the love interest we remember, Kate and Petruchio, Juliet and her Romeo, the immortally longing Antony and Cleopatra. If young Miranda and Ferdinand are pallid copies of these other lovers, they have the distinct advantage of having at least the chance to live out their lives together in the Milan to which they are returning at play's end. If the Bard does not show us that kind of love achieved here he has shown us a variety of love far higher, for Prospero has contrived the entire play, the tempest itself to give his beloved daughter a mate and a chance at life in the great world beyond. As Shakespeare left the world of art and artifice for Stratford to end his days, he leaves us with the image of a father creating a world in which his daughter can live and love" a final image of love indeed.

These short pages have presented only a few thoughts embedded in the universe created by this towering genius. While those of scientific bent ferret out the secrets of the vast universe around us, earthbound readers can lose themselves in the fourth dimension delving into Shakespeare's emotional and intellectual universe. The final score: three weddings (and a love affair), balanced against two funerals. A close call, perhaps, but In Shakespeare's universe, moving from joke to universal vision, love is often and memorably at the heart of things.
