

FRIAR LAWRENCE'S 'BENEFIT OF CLERGY'.  
NEW LIGHT ON THE DENOUEMENT OF SHAKESPEARE'S  
*ROMEO AND JULIET*

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There are in the last scene of *Romeo and Juliet* many features of a dramatic presentation of legal proceedings in a supposedly criminal case. To put it more precisely, what we have here is a sort of on-the-spot investigation. The 'king's peace' was broken and the dead bodies of important subjects would wholly justify the presence of the absolute ruler of a small Italian duchy. Such a prince would, naturally, unite all the three powers in his person: legislative, executive and judicial. We have already seen the Prince pass a decree in I. i and administer justice to Romeo according to that decree after Tybalt's death in III. i.

The quintessence of what happens in *Romeo and Juliet* from V. iii. 171 onwards is a dramatic presentation of a procedure on the part of the Prince and his police force (the watch), to find out by means of a hearing given to witnesses and suspects, what was the cause of the violent death of three important subjects of the Prince.

On the face of it, the whole incident in the interpretation of the watch and in the Prince's opinion looks like murder and the Friar like a suspect:

*Third Watch.* Here is a friar, that trembles, sighs and weeps:

We took this mattock and this spade from him,  
As he was coming from this churchyard side.

*First Watch.* A great suspicion: stay the friar too.

(V. iii. 184 - 187)

Compared with the Prince, the First Watch, obviously in charge of the arrests, is rather cautious, because he says:

We see the ground whereon these woes do lie;  
But the true ground of all these piteous woes  
We cannot without circumstance descry.

(V. iii. 179 - 181)

and the Prince puts it more bluntly:

*Prince.* Search, seek, and know how this foul murder comes.

(V. iii. 198)

The suspects and witnesses are 'attached' (V. iii. 173) or 'stayed' (V. iii. 187) i.e. 'arrested' or 'detained' and brought by force to the scene of the incident which is, in most of its details well known to the reader or spectator, but of which both the Prince, and what is more important, the Capulets and Montague are completely unaware, at least as far as the causes are concerned.

In the other judgement scene (III. i), the Prince's approach was different. He passed judgement there on the spot and his verdict was banishment for Romeo, because it seemed then that everything was clear. But as G. L. Kittredge pointed out, in III. i,

"Benvolio's account of the affray is substantially true, but he errs in representing Tybalt as attacking Mercutio".

(Kittredge 1939:742)

Benvolio's account, which might seem another unnecessary repetition of a part of the story which the audience could see before, might have contributed to the Prince's leniency in changing the penalty of death for banishment in Romeo's case. Thus, the repetition with the striking and deliberate lie in it has a definite dramatic function in that scene and that case. This is something important to remember when we approach the apparently unnecessary repetition of the story in Friar Lawrence's speech in the last scene of the play.

Now, in V.iii the Prince is shown to be faced with something much more intricate and he does not pass judgement on the spot (with one significant exception). There are two speeches of the Prince which constitute a sort of framework of his investigation into the case he is confronted with.

*Prince.* Seal up the mouth of outrage for a while,  
Till we can clear these ambiguities,  
And know their spring, their head, their true descent;  
And then I will be general of your woes,  
And lead you even to death: meantime forbear,  
And let mischance be slave to patience. —  
Bring forth the parties of suspicion.

V. iii. 216—222

and in his last speech he says:

Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things;  
Some shall be pardon'd, and some punished:

(V. iii. 307, 308)

The dramatic function of the final part of the last scene of *Romeo and Juliet* can be described in the following way: the whole causal motivation of

the play rests very much on the huge 'gap of awareness'<sup>1</sup> between the lovers and Friar Lawrence on the one hand and the lovers' parents and Paris on the other hand. Not to speak of a minor participation in it of other characters, such as the Nurse. In order to make the reconciliation of the two families plausible the dramatist had to close the 'gap of awareness' and parade the details of the lovers' story in front of the surviving major characters and participants, even in spite of the fact that the reader or spectator knew all these things before. This is what Bertrand Evans pointed out in his article entitled *The Brevity of Friar Lawrence* (1950: 841 - 865). An even wider and more convincing justification of the final part of V.iii is presented by T. J. B. Spencer (1967: 36, 37). Nevertheless many scholars tend to think that Friar Lawrence talks too much in that scene anyway. Evans's 'Brevity' sounds against this background either as irony or as a paradox. May be I shall succeed in proving in this essay that it is neither.

We have come to the cemetery of Verona for somewhat different reasons than for the sole purpose of showing that Friar Lawrence is not after all as windy and loquacious as it has hitherto been assumed.

The one thing which becomes very striking when we pay close attention to what is going on, is the strange behaviour and enigmatic utterances of witness Friar Lawrence. He says after the Prince's command

Bring forth the parties of suspicion.

(V. iii. 222)

*Fri.* I am the greatest, able to do least,  
Yet most suspected, as the time and place  
Doth make against me, of this direful murder;

(V. iii. 223 - 225)

Why should the Friar use the word 'murder' if he knew that nothing like that, in a literal sense that is, did happen? And one wonders what he means exactly when he says:

And here I stand, both to impeach and purge  
Myself condemned and myself excused.

(V. iii. 226, 227)

Why is he talking of the possibility of the penalty of death in store for him?:

and, if aught in this  
Miscarried by my fault, let my old life  
Be sacrificed some hour before his time  
Unto the rigour of severest law.

(V. iii. 266 - 269)

<sup>1</sup> I am using here a term applied by Bertrand Evans in his book *Shakespeare's Comedies*, Oxford 1960. Cf. pp. VII - IX.

The metaphorical treatment of the final part of *Romeo and Juliet* as a judgement scene is thus only partly metaphorical and if it can be expected to help us in the re-examination of the case, it must be properly followed up.

Let us then tentatively suppose that Friar Lawrence is a witness in a trial by jury, an English institution which is more than 700 years old and which was perfectly well known to Shakespeare and his contemporaries. He would then be expected to make his deposition under an oath that he would tell 'the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth'. A similar tentative reasoning when applied to Benvolio's deposition in III.i would provide a striking example of perjury. Why should we not put to such a test Friar Lawrence's speech in the final part of the play? I did, and this article is partly a report of my findings. There is perjury, too, hidden in the loquacity of the Friar and in this respect his speech is a typical Shakespearean parallel to Benvolio's white lie hidden in his graphic, but also seemingly too loquacious and repetitious description of the two duels. The only difference is that Friar Lawrence did not change anything. He only failed to tell 'the whole truth', he omitted some extremely relevant details of the causes of the lovers' death. There is another difference. Benvolio's lie is a white lie. It was devised to save Romeo from death penalty. Friar Lawrence, motivated by fear of death, (he would suffer death penalty if something could be found to have 'miscarried' by his 'fault'), defends himself. We cannot, of course, accuse Friar Lawrence, as if he was a real person and the reasons will be shown subsequently to have a very important bearing upon things that are the concern of Shakespeare scholars: the tragic motivation of the whole play.

Meanwhile, I must stick to my legal metaphor. As a result of his perjury, a thing that will be soon explained, Friar Lawrence, in spite of the Prince's obvious prorogation of the verdict as to other persons involved, a verdict that in Shakespeare's play, unlike in Brooke's poem, remains unrecorded, is here as well as in Brooke's poem acquitted on the spot. When Friar Lawrence talks about the possibility of the penalty of death in store for him, the Prince answers:

*Prince.* We still have known thee for a holy man.

(V. iii. 269)

This acquittal has a highly symbolical significance: it was not only Prince Escalus of Verona that regarded Friar Lawrence not only as a holy but completely innocent man, but all Shakespeare scholars who somehow failed to probe the Friar's part in the chain of events that caused the catastrophe and who very often presented him as the epitome of wisdom. Friar Lawrence is regarded by many critics as a sort of foil to Romeo's youthful haste and passion and

the general tenor of what they say is, 'would Romeo just follow Friar Lawrence's maxims and advice, he could have avoided disaster' (Cain 1947:163 - 172). Friar Lawrence is sometimes made more or less to represent Shakespeare's own standpoint and opinions.

There also seems to exist a consensus of opinion that the greatest flaw in the otherwise precise and nearly perfect motivation of the play, if not the weakest point in the dramaturgy of all the tragedies of Shakespeare is the Friar John episode. The problem is presented in the best way by Bertrand Evans (1950: 843) in the article on Friar Lawrence which I have mentioned before:

Friar John's detention remains one of the greatest embarrassments in Shakespeare. Othello's handkerchief can be waved boldly, like a flag in spite of Rymmer, because 'there's magic in it'. The impossibility of Lear's opening folly can be convincingly diminished on the ground that the real arrangements for division of the kingdom were drawn before the scene opens. The portly sails can draw safe home to harbour the very last of Antonio's lost argosies, because that is the way of things in the world of comedy. *Titus Andronicus* ceases to embarrass those who prove to themselves that Shakespeare must not have written it. But Friar John's detention remains an unsightly fact that must be apologized for, grieved over, elaborately evaded, minimized, blamed on Brooke, or, all else failing, confessed as irredeemable.

The disastrous influence of this episode upon the dramatic structure and motivation of the play had been already aptly pointed out by Pierce Baker:

At the moment when it is necessary that Romeo shall have news that Juliet is waiting for him in the tomb of her fathers, the swift, relentless logic of the play breaks down ... What is it which prevents Romeo from getting the news that his wife is merely stupefied, not dead? Merely the device of the dramatist; there is no inevitableness in this whatsoever ... That turn ... is at the will of the dramatist, is melodrama, and it breaks the chain of circumstance necessary for perfect tragedy (quoted after Evans 1950 : 843).

This article is to show that the helplessness and adverse criticism of Shakespeare's scholars here presented was the result of Friar Lawrence's, metaphorically understood, 'benefit of clergy', i.e. of a presupposed conviction of his perfection, wisdom and entirely positive and laudable part in the events presented in *Romeo and Juliet*. When one reads the criticism concerned with *Romeo and Juliet* one feels a sort of witch-hunting atmosphere in which scholars and critics try to prop up the questionable 'hamartia' of the play by insisting on the tragic guilt of one or both the lovers. Especially those critics do so who do not properly realize the much wider significance and meaning of the Aristotelian term 'hamartia' beyond a mere literally understood 'guilt'. But fortunately the English, unlike e.g. the Poles and the Germans, have used for a long time such terms as 'tragic flaw', 'tragic error', 'error of judgement'



and we are reminded by classical scholars that the fundamental meaning of the word 'hamartia' is 'failure to hit the mark'<sup>2</sup>, something that will be of real importance in our further discussion.

Whatever we think about Friar John's detention, I hope we can all agree that the last important link in the chain of events that cause the lovers' death is the failure of the communication system, if I may use such an expression, the communication system between Verona and Mantua, between Friar Lawrence and Romeo. In Brooke's poem the communication arrangements are presented in a rather sketchy and general way and precision is immaterial to him:

Though thou ne mayest thy friends, here in Verona see,  
They are not banished Mantua, where safely thou must be,  
Thether they may resort, though thou resort not hether,  
And there in suretie may talke of your affairs together.

(1451 - 1454) (Bullough 1957)

In so many words just one obvious thing is expressed by Brooke's Friar Lawrence: the communication line is from Verona to Mantua and not vice versa. Nothing is specified as to who will be authorized to communicate with Romeo: 'thy friends' is the general term of reference we find in Brooke's poem.

When Shakespeare's play was compared with this principal source it was not noticed what a tremendous difference there is in the communication arrangements between those two works. The distinguished Polish Shakespearean scholar, Władysław Tarnawski (1924:XXXIV) wrote:

As to Romeo, there would not be any disaster, if he would have communicated with Friar Lawrence who had undertaken to inform him about all the more important incidents

This is, of course, another rebuke to Romeo. But Tarnawski (1924:XXXIV) at least realized one thing, viz. that

Romeo's guilt is not a moral flaw. It is rather a mistake of the kind of political or strategic errors of Brutus and Cassius.

He at least does not make a beast of Romeo, as some critics do (Cain 1947:179)

<sup>2</sup> This particular point concerning the German concept and term for Aristotle's 'Hamartia' is explained by Kurt von Fritz in his book *Antike und moderne Tragödie*, Berlin 1962, in the following way: „Diese Unvollkommenheit im Charakter des Holden der Tragödie, die nach Aristoteles' Meinung in einer guten Tragödie notwendig ist, kann sehr gut als 'the tragic flaw' bezeichnet werden. Hier paßt das englische Wort vortrefflich, während das deutsche Wort 'tragische Schuld' offenbar ganz fehl am Platz ist (von Fritz 1962 : 3).

But still Tarnawski was far from noticing the real significance of the communication arrangements. Neither did he try to examine how they were implemented by Friar Lawrence.

At last I have to produce the most important evidence in the case. When Romeo is taking his farewell from Friar Lawrence, the latter says to him:

Sojourn in Mantua: I'll find out your man,  
And he shall signify from time to time  
Every good hap to you that chances here:

(III.iii. 169 - 171)

Here is my interpretation of the above quoted lines the significance of which passed unnoticed in Shakespeare scholarship.

(1) First of all no friar is mentioned here as a possible messenger from Friar Lawrence to Romeo,

(2) There is no doubt as to the identity of the person who is chosen to be the future authorized messenger. This person is Romeo's servant Balthasar. Although the case is obvious from that point of view, that detail is so important for my arguments that I take the liberty of pointing out that in *Romeo and Juliet* the word 'man' with the possessive adjectives 'your' 'his' and with the possessive case 'Romeo's' invariably means 'servant', 'Romeo's servant'. We have it first in the exchange between Mercutio and Tybalt. When Romeo enters (SD 'Enter Romeo') Tybalt who was not interested in a fight with Mercutio says:

Tyb. Well, peace be with you, sir; here comes my man.

(III.i. 59)

Mercutio, who has serious reasons of his own to divert Tybalt's rage from Romeo to himself, because he thinks that Romeo is not fit to fight with Tybalt, answers:

Mer. But I'll be hang'd, sir, if he wear your livery:

(III.i. 60)

In the judgement scene the Prince asks:

Where is Romeo's man? What can he say to this?

(V.iii. 271)

The man who speaks next is Balthasar. The watch also refer to Balthasar in the same way:

Second Watch. Here's Romeo's man; we found him in the churchyard.

(V.iii. 182)

The stage direction reads: *Re-enter some of the Watch with Balthasar.*

(3) The words 'I'll find out' uttered by Friar Lawrence as well as the stage directions show clearly that Balthasar is not present when lines III. iii. 169 - 171 are spoken by the former. Friar Lawrence promises to find him later. The best place to find Balthasar would be Montague's house but Friar Lawrence never visits that house and what is more important there is not even the slightest

indication in the text of the play that he ever bothers to find him. As we know, he does not even do it when there is important news to carry to Romeo,

(4) The words 'from time to time' suggest that there is no urgent need in the foreseeable near future, but they suggest also that Balthasar is chosen for the function of a messenger throughout the time of Romeo's stay in Mantua,

(5) Romeo who has to leave Verona in a secret way and must avoid his house of all places, will not have time to 'find out' 'his man', but of course he does not have to, because it was precisely what Friar Lawrence promised to do.

The whole argumentation I have presented above and, indeed, the very *raison d'être* of this essay might be open to serious doubt on the following grounds: we know and most Shakespeare scholars would insist that lines III. iii. 169 - 171 might be another example of Shakespeare's carelessness which exists or is alleged to exist in many other cases in his plays.

Anyone can ask the fundamental question: Were the communication arrangements in the play meant by Shakespeare to have any significance in the motivation of the play and how can we know it? Could we not assume that Shakespeare simply forgot these arrangements in the course of writing the play?

I hope that we have in the play sufficient evidence that this time Shakespeare was not 'careless', that he treated that detail as an important link in his motivation.

If we treat the arrangements of lines III. iii. 169 - 171 as a sort of agreement between two parties, one being Friar Lawrence and the other Romeo, we are fully satisfied to find that, unlike Friar Lawrence, the other party, i.e. Romeo remembers the agreement and sticks to its vital terms.

When Balthasar comes to Romeo in Mantua and tells him about Juliet:

Her body sleeps in Capel's monument,  
And her immortal part with angels lives.

(V.i.18, 19)

and stresses that he was an eye-witness of Juliet's funeral

I saw her laid low in her kindred's vault,

(V.i. 20)

Romeo is deeply struck with pain and in a sort of trance, and yet he probes the truth of Balthasar's statement with a vital question:

Hast thou no letters to me from the friar?

(V.i. 31)

The very fact that Balthasar came to Mantua is shown by Shakespeare to mean to Romeo news from Verona and, more specifically, news from Friar Lawrence, because even before he learns the false news about Juliet's death from Balthasar he says:

News from Verona! How now, Balthasar!  
Dost thou not bring me letters from the friar?

(V.i. 12, 13)

It must be recalled that the arrangements between Friar Lawrence and Romeo (III. iii. 169 - 171) do not contain any specification that the news Balthasar may be expected to submit should be necessarily in the form of a letter. In fact the word 'letter' is not used at all. This explains why the absence of any letter in Balthasar's hands could not *eo ipso* cause any suspicions in Romeo's mind that Balthasar was not found by Friar Lawrence and that there was no communication between them, that Balthasar does not come from Friar Lawrence. This, I hope, may be taken as sufficient evidence that Shakespeare applied his meticulous and deliberate motivation in this case and that the supposition of the accidental character of the detail under discussion is out of the question.

Romeo, perhaps, had given some instructions to Balthasar to observe what was going on in Capulet's house. This seems to be indicated by the following lines spoken by Balthasar:

O, pardon me for bringing these ill news,  
Since you did leave it for my office, sir.

(V.i. 22, 23)

This, of course, could be used as an opportunity for the justification of Friar Lawrence's behaviour: when we suppose that he was looking for Balthasar round Montague's house, Balthasar, following Romeo's 'office', was at that time in the neighbourhood of Capulet's house. But Shakespeare does not make use of this opportunity and nothing like that actually happens in the play.

What does happen is that Friar Lawrence sends Friar John instead of Balthasar, that he does not even bother to try to find him and that he seems to be quite unaware of the dangers involved in his unilateral change of messenger: Balthasar who is quite ignorant of the device of the potion and as a result, unchecked by anybody, brings the false news to Romeo. The only motive behind Friar Lawrence's unilateral decision is haste:

I'll send a friar with speed  
To Mantua

(IV.i. 123, 124)

This is, indeed, the real and one of the most striking tragic ironies of the play that a man whose words 'they stumble who run fast', words which were to be used by many critics for moralizing on Romeo's haste and even as the leitmotif of the play<sup>2</sup>, are thus proved to reflect mainly on Friar Lawrence himself.

<sup>2</sup> Brents Stirling used Friar Lawrence's dictum 'they stumble who run fast' as a title of a chapter in his book *Unity in Shakespearean Tragedy*, New York 1957, but he seems to realize that "all characters, including the Friar, are stumblers who run fast". (1957 : 23).

This seems to be emphasized by a motif which, in my opinion, is highly symbolical. After the stage direction

*Enter, at the other end of the churchyard, Friar Lawrence with a lantern, crow, and spade.*

*Fri.* Saint Francis by my speed! how oft to-night  
Have my old feet stumbled at graves!

(V.iii. 121, 122)

This brings to our view the opposition of 'stumbling' and 'speed' and shows that Friar Lawrence was slow where he should act 'with speed' and 'stumbled' when he wanted to act 'with speed'.

It must be pointed out that Friar Lawrence is shown to be at his wits' end owing to the complications he encounters and to the changes in his plan of action which those changes precipitate. He complains to Juliet:

*Fri.* Ah, Juliet, I already know thy grief!  
It strains me past the compass of my wits:

(IV.i. 46, 47)

This is very significant as a psychological trait. The complicated plan of action that Friar Lawrence has devised becomes more and more complicated with each new development of the situation. He will now still be able to invent the device of the point, but he will be unable to realize all the inherent dangers it creates. There are three different plans of action Friar Lawrence is shown to devise in the play. It will be really 'past the compass of his wits' to grasp the dangers involved.

His first plan of action is to be found in the following passage:

But look thou stay not till the watch be set,  
For then thou canst not pass 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

(III.iii. 148 - 152)

This plan involves Romeo in the necessity of living for a time in Mantua, because the 'blazoning' of the marriage and above all the reconciliation of the two families and obtaining the Prince's pardon are diplomatic undertakings which really could require a lot of time.

The second plan was, unlike the first one, characterized by many risks and dangers. The second is to be found in Friar Lawrence's report of the letter Romeo never received, because of Friar John's detention. In his last speech Friar Lawrence says:

meantime I writ to Romeo  
That he should hither come as this dire night,

To help to take her from her borrow'd grave,  
Being the time the potion's force should cease.

(V.iii. 246 - 249)

According to the first plan Romeo's return would be open, legal and presenting no risk to his life. The second plan, as an illegal return of a banished man would mean to him the death penalty in case of detection. It must be recalled that when Paris recognizes Romeo at the cemetery of Verona, he wants to 'apprehend' i.e. 'arrest' him as a banished man and, in his misguided opinion, as a 'felon'. This is what Romeo's illegal return could cause in any circumstances. Just to have Romeo at hand when he offers his consolation to Juliet Friar Lawrence is ready to risk that much!

When Friar John comes with the letter he has failed to deliver Friar Lawrence develops his third plan, which is, in his opinion, adapted to the new circumstances:

Then, all alone,  
At the prefixed hour of her waking,  
Came I to take her from her kindred's vault,  
Meaning to keep her closely at my cell  
Till I conveniently could send to Romeo:

(V.iii. 252 - 256)

It may seem that this plan is safer to Romeo than the second one. He is not expected to come to Verona at once, for an appointed hour, irrespective of any temporary dangers that might have arisen specifically at that time. In the third plan Romeo's stay at Mantua is indefinite in time again, though probably shorter than according to the first plan, but what is actually of tremendous importance here, there is no communication line for an indefinite time between Friar Lawrence and Romeo and during that time Romeo would be kept in total ignorance of the potion device. There is a dangerous 'gap of awareness', this time a gap created by Friar Lawrence. His unilateral decision of changing the messenger and his total neglect of Balthasar and not Friar John's detention should be regarded as the last important link in the chain of events which caused Romeo's death and consequently also the death of Juliet. I am not blind to Romeo's character as a vital factor, but his character was well known to Friar Lawrence and this is shown very clearly by Shakespeare. The gap of awareness created by Friar Lawrence's exhausted brain and the logical fault in his thinking are thus, when all is taken into consideration, an illustration of how the 'hamartia' of the play works.

Although we could learn many other minute details from Friar Lawrence's speech in V. iii., there is not a word about his unilateral change in the communication arrangements. Scholars often say that *Romeo and Juliet* presents a sort of opposition of old age and youth and many of them see in the old age and experience of Friar Lawrence the 'moral' of the play. Does that mean that we



should turn the tables and see the play as a sort of opposition of senility and youth? Such a proposition would be trivial and hardly worth while.

We might suggest here that Friar Lawrence by virtually causing the death of the lovers by his 'fault' gives a new lease of life and a new significance to the play as tragedy and this is perhaps a possibility of a somewhat different interpretation of the play.

I am not going to exaggerate the significance of this essay for such a new interpretation. Some points, however, become more clear in the new light it throws at the dénouement of the play. E. g., Evans, even after explaining that Balthasar's positive act of bringing the false news and not the negative fact of Friar John's failing to bring Friar Lawrence's letter precipitated the catastrophe of the play, still is puzzled by the episode of Friar John's detention. It seems to him still devoid of function. In the light of this essay it can be seen as the best illustration of Friar Lawrence's 'fault'. It is *the* fault.

Can we not, however, see Friar Lawrence's fault as a part of the play's rather precarious 'hamartia'? Is not his 'fault' a sort of 'failing to hit the mark'? Is it not more plausible as a part of tragic motivation than the purely accidental Friar John episode? Friar Lawrence's fault may be demonstrated to be partly an emanation of his character and 'condition'. These are questions which it is safer to ask than to answer, but I hope that the effort of some hairsplitting in this essay will not be futile and unjustified<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> The numbering in this article is that of *The Globe Edition* of Shakespeare's plays and the text quoted is that of *The Arden Shakespeare*, London 1917.