

**"THE JUDICIOUS AUTHOR": A NOTE ON POSSIBLY THE FIRST
AMERICAN PRODUCTION OF *ROMEO AND JULIET***

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Despite the fact that in the history of the colonial theatre in America Shakespeare emerges as the most frequently performed playwright¹ our knowledge of the ways he was played is mostly based on guesswork and supposition. Original material, such as prompt-books, play-bills and other theatre documents, is almost nonexistent and the contemporary records in the form of letters, diaries, press comments or play reviews are usually silent on issues most important.

In light of this paucity of information unique and invaluable appears an advertisement in the *New York Gazette* for March 23, 1730, signed by one "Doctor Joachimus Bertrand" and announcing possibly the first American production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Missed by most historiographers of the colonial stage it tells us that the said doctor is to play the part of the Apothecary in Shakespeare's play. Bertrand thus writes himself:

as this Tragedy will be the first to be acted at the Revenge Meeting-house, which is fitting up for that purpose, I hereby invite the Ladies to be present the first Night, the part of the *Apothecary* to be perform'd by myself *in propria Persona*, which I hope will be kindly taken and look'd upon as a great condescension in a Physician.

After this curious announcement its author proceeds with a summary and a critical commentary on the play. He begins with Friar Laurence's speech in II.iv, where the latter enters holding a basket of flowers. The reader of the *York Gazette* is told that near the end of this soliloquy,

¹ In fact, Shakespeare was the only pre-Restoration dramatist included in the colonial repertoire. Although it is impossible to provide accurate statistics, extant records give the total of one-hundred-and-seventy-two Shakespearean performances counted between 1752, the year of the earliest recorded professional Shakespeare, and 1774, when the Continental Congress passed a bill prohibiting theatrical entertainment. Americans in five leading cities saw fourteen different plays by Shakespeare.

wherein the Friar explains his fatal Knowledge in Simples, *Romeo*, the unhappy lover of *Juliet*, interrupts him, the good Father, who had, it seems, been his Confidant in former Amor with *Rosaline*, chides him for unkindly leaving her, but so kindly chides him, as shows an overflowing ghostly tenderness for the common frailty of Flesh and Blood, and at last he promises to assist *Romeo* in his new Intreague with *Juliet*.

Bertrand's next commentary, following an excerpt from the play, is also carried out in the same puritanical spirit. When in his cell the Friar says to the young lovers

Come, come with me, and we will make short work
For, by your leaves, you shall not stay alone
Till holy Church incorporate Two in One.

(II.vi. 35-37)

the doctor explains that

the word 'Incorporate' in this place would, perhaps, give the Reader too vigorous and feeling a Sensation, if the judicious Author had not put it in the sanctified Mouth of a Friar, and so directed its situation, as that it stands preceded and over-aw'd by the chaste, cold and phlegmatick holy Church, which allays its heat, and renders any wanton Ideas, which otherwise might arise from an impure Imagination, utterly impotent, dry and ineffectual.

Shakespeare is next characterized as one who offers precautions against a "hasty and very private Wedding." A summary of the lovers' worsening fortunes follows, rounded off with a twenty-line quotation of *Romeo's* gothic speech about the Apothecary's shop (V. i. 35-54). Bertrand specifically points to this scene as "one of the most beautiful in all Shakespeare's Works," and adds:

it is the *Pictura loquens*, which forever preserves both Features and colouring, and will last as long as the shop of an Apothecary is to be found upon the face of the Earth, I hope much longer.

What naturally catches one's attention here is the author's peculiar choice of scene for such special praise. Shakespeare's Apothecary is described by *Romeo* as "a caitiff wretch" (V. i. 52), who looks like a beggar and who for profit would even risk his own life by selling illegal poisons. Bertrand the Doctor seems both particularly fascinated with his professional counterpart – the Apothecary, and at the same time wished to distance himself from such unsympathetically presented character. One remembers how at the beginning he "begs the Ladies" to see his taking up the part as "a great condescension in a Physician."

Taken as a whole the above notice is, no doubt, suggestive of several questions. Striking, first of all, is its length. Usually theatrical matters would take marginal notes in relatively tiny newspaper sheets, filled with facts about sales, auctions, as well as literary pieces, reprinted often from the London magazines. Frequently papers would not even grant space to announce the titles of the coming performances and to find a conventional compliment that a play was received "with universal applause" was at that time a lucky exception. In this light, a two-column theatrical notice, generously sprinkled

with quotations from the play (Bertrand cites fifty-one lines from *Romeo and Juliet*), together with a summary and a elaborate analysis is unusual.

Most illuminating, however, are doctor Bertrand's critical observations. By referring to the love between *Juliet* and *Romeo* as a "new Intreague" (versus the "old" one involving *Rosaline*), and by reducing this love to the "common frailty of Flesh and Blood," for which the Friar "shews an overflowing ghostly tenderness," Bertrand points to the importance in Puritan belief of lucidity and rationality of emotions governing love and sex. This is reemphasized when Shakespeare is referred to as a "judicious Author", who by clever manipulations keeps an audience from an overly emotional response to the lovers' tragic predicament. Additionally, the sententious tone of the article, reducing Shakespeare's lines to neat illustrations of moral conduct, testifies to the colonies' perpetuation of the quintessentially eighteenth-century concepts of order, reason and moderation. It primarily echoes the tastes of a Georgian England.

On the other hand, the fact that one of Shakespeare's best known plays demanded a synopsis, and that on the pages of such a widely popular paper as the *New York Gazette* the prospective audience was asked not to identify a character in the play with the actor impersonating him, is a clear testimony that the early American public not only was unfamiliar with Shakespeare's drama but also quite lacking in rudimentary audience skills.

Another question that arises from this intriguing advertisement concerns the status of the company that was ready for the presentation of *Romeo and Juliet* in New York, in 1730. Was Bertrand the leader of an amateur group of players or an amateur who joined a professional company?² It seems rather unlikely that he should write in the name of an organized troupe and yet give so few pertinent facts about the production. Besides, if professional actors were involved, they would have had to obtain consent from the local magistrates, thus leaving a record of their activity. According to Isaak Stokes's account of early theatricals in New York, the "Revenge Meeting-house" was presumably a local tavern, "fitted up for the purpose" of occasional amateur productions (see Stokes 1928: 356). It is also likely that Bertrand, well aware of the anti-theatrical sentiment among New York religious groups, deliberately announced the performance with such prudence and caution, sparing facts about the actors, tickets, time etc., and stressing instead the morally uplifting content of the tragedy.

² Before the professional performers arrived from England, the mingling of amateurs with trained actors was commonly practiced in the colonial theatre world, though not in every province. In the colonies south of the Potomac River, where the cultivation of drama found more genial soil, papers would often call for citizens to take part in a play. In the northernmost colonies, where public sentiment was antitheatrical, notices encouraging inhabitants either to witness a play or, worse, to participate in its staging were printed infrequently in order to avoid adverse reaction. An equally unreceptive climate was produced by the religious groups of New York and Philadelphia.

Although no other mention of the intended production of *Romeo and Juliet* has thus far been found, doctor Bertrand's announcement must count as part of the history of Shakespearean reception in the colonial period. It is also the first documented reference in a theatrical context to the existence of the Elizabethan dramatist on the early American stage. No other *Romeo and Juliet* is recorded for twenty-four years³ after which it stood second in popularity only to *Richard III*.

REFERENCES

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Stokes, J. N. 1928. *The iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909*. New York.

³ The New York *Mercury* for January 28, 1754, announced the production of *Romeo and Juliet* on that day by the Hallam Company from London.