


UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Response to Paul A. Kottman, "Defying the Stars: Tragic Love as the Struggle for Freedom in Romeo and Juliet" 

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1t99p448>

Journal

Shakespeare Quarterly, 63(1)

ISSN

0037-3222

Author

Lupton, Julia Reinhard

Publication Date

2012

DOI

10.1353/shq.2012.0010

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Response to Paul A. Kottman, “Defying the Stars: Tragic Love as the Struggle for Freedom in *Romeo and Juliet*”

JULIA REINHARD LUPTON

WE THOUGHT WE KNEW what *Romeo and Juliet* was all about: the conflict between the individual and society, between young love and old hate, between subjective experience and external norms. Yet these conflicts, Paul A. Kottman argues in this iconoclastic new reading of the play, have already been pushed into the background by the time the two lovers compose their first sonnet. Yes, the families are feuding, but a certain civic or constitutional order has already rendered this vendetta archaic and inconsequential, no longer able to satisfy the need for virile recognition on the part of either the older or the younger men. Yes, family feuds and social expectations divide the lovers, but these “stony limits” (2.2.67) can be overleaped, though not without cost, by any ingenious and self-directed teen equipped with a rope ladder or a smart phone.¹ Yes, Romeo’s murder of Tybalt exiles him from Verona, but it does not condemn him to death, and the banishment invites all manner of solutions, many of them tested in other plays by Shakespeare. And yes, the death of Romeo and Juliet will ultimately reconcile the families, ratifying the choral constitutionalism already on offer in Act 1—but this communal achievement jars with our investment in the acts of the two lovers. It computes formally and generically, but not affectively; no civic gain can be worth these private losses, in part because these losses are not fully felt as such.

Equally, however, the play is not about the triumph of love in any *Todesliebe* sense. The lovers are *not* distinguished ultimately by their fusion, their becoming one, or their dying into eros. Instead, Kottman argues that they are marked above all by separation, moving apart in the very moment of committing themselves to each other, like God and Adam on Michelangelo’s famous ceiling. Fast-forwarding to our moment, Kottman replays the balcony scene as the difficulty of hanging up the phone, and he restages the parting in Act 3 as

¹ Quotations from *Romeo and Juliet* are from the Arden edition of Brian Gibbons (London: Methuen, 1980).

a break-up moment, each partner choosing to leave the other. When Romeo and Juliet finally kill themselves in the tomb, they die apart, first one and then the other. Yet these elements of distance do not in Kottman's account serve to render their love ironic or suspicious, suddenly subject to demystification and parody (Shakespeare is not Mercutio, urging us to be "rough with love" [1.4.27], and neither is Kottman.) Distance does not deflate or ambiguate love so much as characterize its essence; the play reveals love—"true love" (for example, at 2.6.33), love capable of truth—to hang on the lovers' mutual recognition, acknowledgments that individuate and divide each lover in the very act of joining their gazes, palms, lips, and rhyme words. This separateness, and the exhilarating capacity for self-consciousness and for action that it produces, is what is really at stake in the drama in Kottman's analysis. The chance to become oneself through the other animates the lovers' conversations, as well as their decisions for death at the end. Both of them, but especially Juliet, actively claim this separation as the abyssal ground of a new subjectivity. This sense of a new separateness, not given or suffered but actively and creatively achieved through the intensity of attachment to another, divides Romeo and Juliet from their households and from the stultifying claims of their families on their biological life-deaths. It also, however, divides the lovers from each other, and thus remains a tragic element in their relationship, at once its most precious and its most precarious virtue.

Kottman's argument both comments on and departs from Hegel, whose thought centers tragedy on the struggle for freedom and self-consciousness, a struggle that involves recognition by others and thus always binds freedom to instances of dependence and constraint. For Hegel, modern tragedy abandons the classical conflict between objective duties in order to assay increasingly quixotic forms of subjectivity, interiority, and self-consciousness, affective and cognitive conditions hosted by characters whose dilemmas are no longer fully explained by their concrete situations. For Hegel (at least for the Hegel of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*), the duel remains the essential script for tragic struggle. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Kottman argues, Shakespeare has effectively displaced the duel in the first abortive scene of the play, indicating that for him, the struggle for freedom lies elsewhere: in the drama of the emergence of self-consciousness in the love relationship itself, already unmoored from the unsafe harbor of the household ("I am no pilot," professes Romeo [2.2.82], floundering in the uncharted waters of love). Although they define modernity, these subjective adventures do not bear directly on transformations in sociohistorical forms of life as their reflection or consequence; instead, each birth into subjectivity is a

new act, requiring the “ongoing invention of its own workable contexts, aims and ends.”² Hence, our sense that the constitutional renewal of Verona at the end of the play is somehow extraneous to the drama of the two lovers: two different kinds of work are being done in the play, and they run on tracks that certainly cross and echo each other but never fully converge in a single calculus of loss and gain. For Kottman, *Romeo and Juliet* is exemplary for Shakespearean tragedy in rendering the disconnect between inheritable life worlds and the subjective experience of love so painfully, even awkwardly, evident (so that we experience the denouement as bad timing or bad faith).

In this and other works, including his two monographs and his anthology *Philosophers on Shakespeare*, Paul Kottman has been patiently but polemically building a project that asks after the conditions of the dramatic in scenes that stage the emergence of human subjectivity, meaning, and value.³ Kottman calls his approach “philosophical dramaturgy,” understood as the ongoing and engaged phenomenological inquiry into the performative origins of our key concepts and experiences of action, life, love, and thought. He writes, “Rather than see drama solely as the depiction of the values, rituals and practices of a particular culture or social-historical world, philosophical dramaturgy also tries to depict the threshold of social-historical life, our *becoming* human—showing how human (socio-historical, cultural, institutional) values and practices take shape or crumble *through the performance of certain actions*.”⁴ Dramaturgy is the art of preparing a play for performance;⁵ Kottman’s movement through *Romeo and Juliet* is dramaturgical rather than hermeneutic, insofar as he eschews exegesis and close reading in order to retell and re-orchestrate the play around key emotional subtexts that are also structures of thought and scenes of action. (Note that figure, symbol, and theme, which remain the green eggs and ham of my own Shakespearean engagements, have little business here.) The effect is often breathtakingly, even uncomfortably, intimate: whereas much scholarship

² Paul Kottman, “No Greater Powers than We Can Contradict,” in special issue on Shakespeare and Phenomenology, ed. James Kearney and Kevin Curran, *Criticism* (forthcoming). On action as new birth, see Hannah Arendt *The Human Condition* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1958). Arendt is also a practitioner of philosophical dramaturgy in that she locates action at the heart of both drama and politics.

³ See Paul A. Kottman, *A Politics of the Scene* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008); *Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare: Disinheriting the Globe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2009); and (as editor) *Philosophers on Shakespeare* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009).

⁴ Paul A. Kottman, “Duel,” in *Early Modern Theatricality: Oxford Twenty-First-Century Approaches to Literature*, ed. Henry S. Turner (Oxford: Oxford UP, forthcoming).

⁵ On dramaturgy as a practical art that mediates between the aims of page and stage, see Bert Cardullo, ed., *What Is Dramaturgy?* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

today keeps drama at an historical distance, Kottman asks us to respond to Shakespeare in our own capacity as thinkers and doers, as human subjects who are also, like Romeo and Juliet, or Hamlet, or Macbeth, caught up in the drama of living. Reading Shakespeare in this way requires that we reflect on our own historicity, but not that we endlessly historicize—indeed, philosophical dramaturgy asks that we historicize only insofar as those efforts draw us closer to the texts and the dilemmas they pose.

I have been living with Kottman's essay for a while now, as a reader for the journal and as an auditor and interlocutor at several conferences. When I taught *Romeo and Juliet* this summer, I was curious to see how much of Kottman's reading would make its way into my exposition. Although I did not fully abandon the law-desire dialectic, I did find myself attending to action in renewed ways. Although accident and chance riddle a play often criticized for the looseness of its plotting, Kottman, like Ruth Nevo before him, puts new emphasis on the moments of action in the play, and hence reasserts its enduringly tragic character.⁶ Although Romeo proclaims himself "fortune's fool" in the climactic fight scene of Act 3 (3.1.138), he is not simply the victim of circumstance or masculine ideology but has reinitiated the logic of the duel as part of the struggle for self-realization that he is pursuing, simultaneously and on a very different scene, with Juliet. Kottman's emphasis on action and acknowledgment provides us with terms for understanding the two very different scenes of self-realization constituted in the play by fighting and love. In the process, he gives us the opportunity to assent to Shakespeare's valuation of the latter on grounds other than sentimental, without rejecting the former as either temperamentally rash (capriciously subjective) or socially determined (externally scripted).

Juliet embraces the vocabulary of action in Act 4: "My dismal scene I needs must act alone" (4.3.19). Juliet neither agrees to marry Tybalt nor kills herself in order to avoid doing so; instead, Kottman argues that she seeks a "third way" that will allow her to leave her family in a mode other than dying, an act which, at this point in the drama, would manifest the loss, rather than the exercise, of freedom. Juliet's shammed death allows her at once to reconcile with and resist her family by becoming what she had always been to them, "a sleeping beauty," a charismatic instance of mere vitality. When she finally kills herself, it is not as a reaction against family demands or as a desire to merge with Romeo in death, but as a final individuating act, another separation, that meets and matches his: "She recognizes that he has staked his own life in order to lay his body with hers, as his final and defining deed" (33). Here and elsewhere, the play's extraordinary

⁶ Ruth Nevo, "Tragic Form in *Romeo and Juliet*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 9 (1969): 241–58.

exchanges among symbolic acknowledgment, bodily vitality, and (human) death as something more than the end of (biological) life emerge as precisely what is at stake in dramatic action, both on the stage and in our daily dealings with lovers and other strangers.

Kottman has taught me to take seriously the extent to which *Romeo and Juliet* does not belong fully to Shakespeare. (Kottman's own thoughts about the play began in Verona, real home to fictional characters who belong as much to Italy and France as to England.) Although his reading focuses on Shakespeare, Kottman often seems to be reading the story more broadly, in its broader suffusion through modern psychogeographies of love. For example, Kottman calls Romeo and Juliet's death "a double suicide wherein each sees the other dead" (18). Some readers might object: Romeo sees Juliet asleep, not dead, and there is no suicide pact; indeed, their deaths are spaced, sequential, enacted independently, governed by that same distance that Kottman leads us to witness percolating within their love from its inception. Yet adaptations of the play beginning very early on often wake Juliet up *before* the poison has finished Romeo off, allowing the lovers to exchange glances, and sometimes words, one last time.⁷ In these variations, as in Kottman's reading, "*Both* Romeo and Juliet see one another dead" (37; emphasis added).⁸ Other changes favored on stage include exiling Paris from the scene, depriving Romeo of his page, shutting up the Friar, and denying the surviving families a final handshake and the promise of compensatory statuary. Kottman's reading cuts a similar swath through the great buzzing thicket of Act 5 in order to arrive at the drama of "two individuals who enact their separate individuality, their own freedom, the only way that they can—through one another, even in the act of dying" (38). It is not simply that later stagings of *Romeo and Juliet*, including Kottman's reading, remold the play to suit their own tastes; such changes are themselves free acts, "an occasion for their active individuation" (37) in response to a story that surely receives its most glorious impress from Shakespeare, but which belongs to European and indeed world culture more profoundly than any other Shakespearean work. *Romeo and Juliet's* transformations into ballet, opera and symphony—each marking a fundamental departure from Shakespeare's English and hence from the play text considered as the soul of the drama—testify to this world possession and to the

⁷ Daniel Albright, *Musicking Shakespeare: A Conflict of Theatres* (Rochester, NY: U of Rochester P, 2007), 64ff.

⁸ For example, the opera by Gounod, as well as the quasi-operatic treatment of the play by Baz Luhrmann.

extraordinary freedom of other iterations and media in relation to Shakespeare's profoundly enabling work.

Kottman's first book, *A Politics of the Scene*, uses the concept of the scene to link philosophy and dramaturgy: "The semantic history of the word 'scene' moves from a valence dominated by technical fabrication to a valence that privileges the unpredictable here-and-now interactions of human beings. . . . by 'scene'—or, better 'scenes'—I propose to designate any particular horizon of human interaction, inaugurated by the words and deeds of someone or some group, here and now, with the result that a singular relationship or web of relationships is brought into being, sustained, or altered among those on the scene."⁹ Both theater and life are composed of encounters among persons that expose and constitute them subjectively while wringing unintended changes in the world that they inhabit and soliciting various forms of testimony from those who witness them. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare displaces the scene of the duel with the scene of the love affair, whose creation of a new instance of human exchange belongs equally to life and art: "The development of a love affair has an instituting power all its own, correspondent to the poetic invention depicting it" (19). The balcony scene becomes a scene in this full sense not when Romeo praises Juliet from below (this is merely a lyric tableau still caught up in the glamor of Petrarchism), but when Romeo must "halt his rhapsody and . . . recognize Juliet as a free agent" (20), that is, when he hears her speak and responds to her as a thinking being, inaugurating the drama of recognition. So, too, Kottman construes philosophical dramaturgy as an act of witnessing and self-disclosure as well as creative reorchestration—not by devolving into anecdote, but by drawing readers into the circle of thought set into motion by the actions of the play and calling on us to participate in the maintenance of the common scene shared by politics, theater, literature, and life.

Although Kottman's work might seem very far from performance studies, his writing contributes to a certain theatrical discourse, thanks to his nonmimetic, dramaturgical, and phenomenological account of drama and its scenes. *Scene* is also a key term in W. B. Worthen's recent manifesto, *Drama: Between Poetry and Performance*; not unlike Kottman, but with an eye to a very different set of problems, Worthen calls us to "[read] the potential *agency* of drama in the double *scenes* of page and stage."¹⁰ Both Worthen and Kottman turn to the

⁹ Kottman, *Politics of the Scene*, 10–11. For a recent deployment of Kottman's scene with an eye to performance, see Daniel L. Keegan, "Performing Prophecy: More Life on the Shakespearean Scene," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62 (2011): 420–43.

¹⁰ W. B. Worthen, *Drama: Between Poetry and Performance* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

scene because it establishes free-flowing relationships between the actions set forth in play texts and their disposition on the many stages of actualization. For both Worthen and Kottman, the scene always involves the temporal movement of drama into the future *Jetztzeit* of performance and reception, as well as the role of audiences in the constitution of the theatrical. Reading Kottman with Worthen, I would suggest that the modal mutations, surgical cuts, and sentimental resurfacings undergone by *Romeo and Juliet* constitute a scene for criticism that takes both drama and theater seriously, not only as objects of formal analysis or historical comparison, but as what Worthen calls, following Kenneth Burke, “equipments for living.” Reading, Worthen argues, “negotiates between the properties of literature and its deployment as a tool that does work, that enables performance in successive cultures.”¹¹ In Kottman’s philosophical dramaturgy, the lovers’ discourse manifests the uncanny proximity of marriage and divorce broached in every act of saying good-bye, not as the belied truth of a bourgeois institution, but as a necessity worth bearing witness to in order to transform it into the occasion for both freedom and fidelity.

¹¹ Worthen (23) borrows the phrase “equipment for living” from Kenneth Burke; see Burke’s “Literature as Equipment for Living,” *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1973), 293–304.