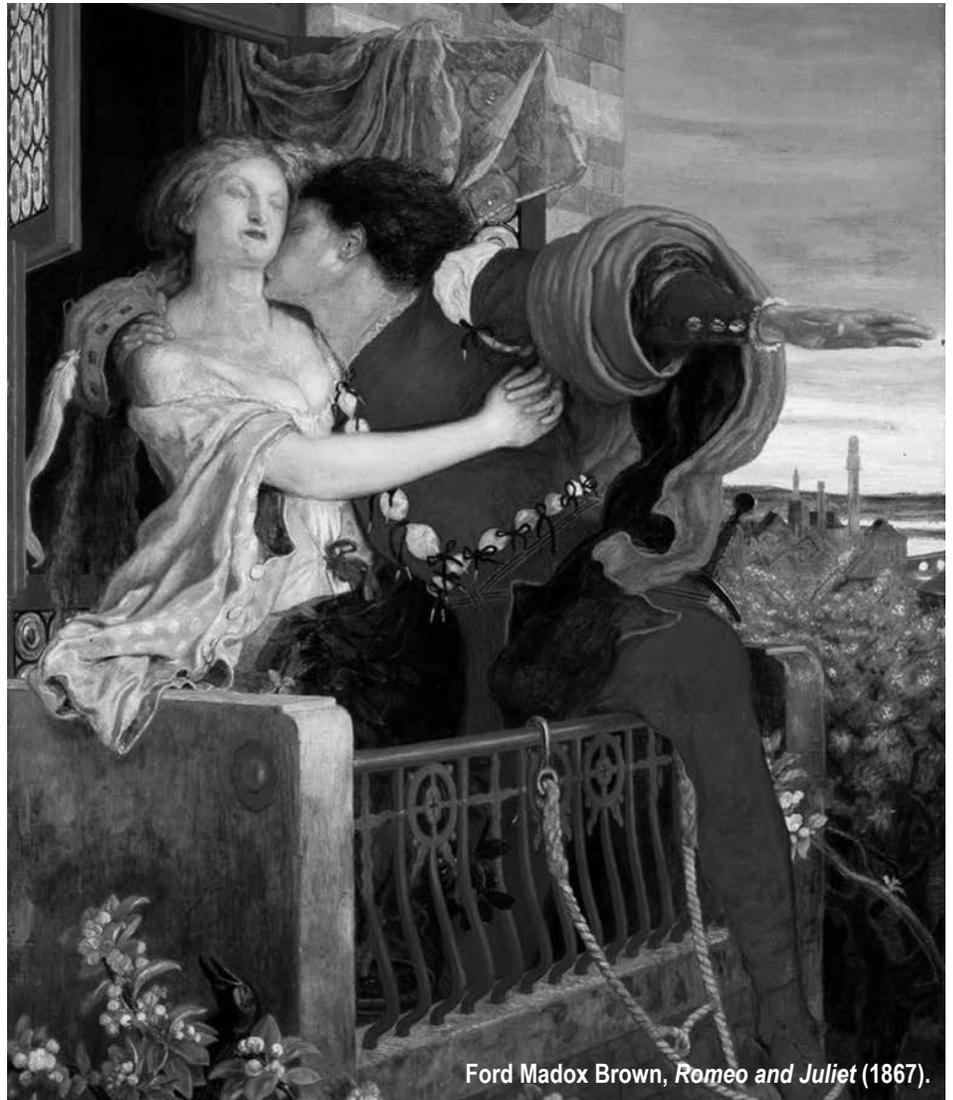


## Putting Romance and Marriage to the Test in Venice and Verona

Shakespeare's plays, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Romeo and Juliet* both take as their assumption that Christian married love must contain both eros and agape and as such the romantic courtship that precedes marriage is depicted both as a time of compelling desire but also a time of serious discernment by the courting couple to determine if they are capable of that total self-giving love. Portia and Bassanio from *The Merchant of Venice* prove themselves capable of Messianic agape, both before and after their marriage, while Romeo and Juliet's courtship is full of desire but empty of sacrifice and their marriage culminates in self-destruction. Thus, the respective forms of the texts of a Romantic Comedy, and the latter a tragedy, reflect the Christian contextual teaching on marriage that the spouses must emulate the spousal love of Christ for his Church.

The romantic connection between Portia and Bassanio occurs before the play begins and the audience is informed of it when Bassanio tells Antonio of the "fair speechless messages" received from Portia while she in turn tells Nerissa that: "I remember him well, and I remember him worthy of thy praise." The romantic phase of their courtship is telescoped into a few brief words and the play is instead given over to the more serious phase of discernment where their love is tested firstly by the casket test, secondly by the trial of Antonio without whom they would never have married and finally by the test of the misplaced ring. The plot of the play puts the priority on the discernment rather than the passion, on the walk rather than the talk.

The casket test is a test for both Portia and Bassanio. Firstly, for Portia who complains that "the will of a living daughter [is] curbed by the will of a dead father" but who nonetheless declares that "unless I be obtained by the manner of my father's will" she will not marry at all. She tells Bassan-



Ford Madox Brown, *Romeo and Juliet* (1867).

io that "I could teach you / How to choose right, but then I am foresworn". Here the Christian paradox of submitting to God's will is dramatized when Portia's obedience to her "father's will" protects her against all the self-serving suitors and delivers to her the man of her desires. Thus, the play acts as a parable of the Christian injunction of doing God's will as a matter of law but also of love, as it is the only path, albeit at times a paradoxical one, to both the good-

ness and the eudemonic happiness of which Aristotle spoke.

Secondly, Bassanio must submit his love to the casket test to prove his worth. He does not hesitate to make his choice, which is to "give and hazard all he hath" which is to say his very self and not just all the money he borrowed from Antonio. The inscription on the winning casket neatly sums up Christian married love that must emulate the total gift of self of Jesus on the Cross

who hazarded his life for his love of humanity. The Catholic understanding of the mystical marriage of the Bridegroom to the Church, His Bride, as the perfect archetype of human marriage is clearly referenced here. Bassanio sees the leaden casket, synonymous as it is with a leaden coffin, not as a deterrent but as a reassurance of the truth of his love.

Fittingly the next test for Portia and Bassanio is one they must face as spouses and occurs within moments of their agreeing to marry. Portia doesn't hesitate to embrace the challenge of married love: "First go with me to church and call me wife, And then away to Venice to your friend; / For never shall you lie by Portia's side / With an unquiet soul". Her reference to their sexual love with the metonym "side", makes it clear that this must be subordinate to the welfare of his "soul", that agape takes priority over eros. Unlike the sad Portia at the beginning of the play who is "awearied of this great world" she has now found her vocation when she avows that "I never did repent for doing good, / Nor shall not now." With those words the stage is set for the good she will do with the intellect, wisdom and knowledge she displays in one of the great court room scenes of all time, which will far outweigh the good she offers to do with her wealth.

Finally, Portia and Bassanio, along with all married couples before and after them, have to face the trial of marriage itself. In the early stages of marriage this will often involve the reordering of priorities, so as to place the spouse ahead of "all others" as specified in the Christian wedding vow. Bassanio forgets his vow and gets his priorities wrong when he declares to Antonio that "my wife, and all the world, / Are not esteem'd above thy life". Hence the audience knows that Portia is more than entitled to test her husband into giving away the ring in order to help him see that, now that he is married, he must make her his priority over Antonio, as Christian teaching demands that a man must leave his father and mother, or in Bassanio's instance the man whom he most owes "in money and in love". Portia's exercise of the spiritual work of mercy in showing Bassanio his fault also accords with her vocation as a wife which entails her concern for her husband's salvation. Bassanio's repentance and Portia's forgiveness models the uniquely Christian injunction that forgiveness and mercy are the only exit strategies for the inevitable misunderstandings and disappointments

"that flesh is heir to".

If Shakespeare put romance and marriage to the test in *The Merchant of Venice*, he does so in a very different manner in *Romeo and Juliet*.

The chorus in the Prologue prepares the audience for a tragedy and not a romantic comedy with the words of warning that it will be a story of "death-mark'd love". Unlike Portia and Bassanio's love that triumphs over death, that of Romeo and Juliet's is defeated by it.

The story of Romeo and Juliet is born in the eros of Romeo and is forever shaped by it and never emerges beyond it. The play begins not with Romeo's love for Juliet, but with a discussion of his disordered life. Romeo is a deeply unhappy and self-absorbed man before he meets Juliet and his failure to address his unhappiness and self-absorption prior to entering into the demanding state of matrimony is a salutary warning that marriage is a demanding vocation and, as such, should only be considered by those suitably predisposed and living a morally ordered life. Disorders that exist prior to marriage will not vanish after it but will act as an impediment to it. How very familiar is Romeo's state to that of many young men today who hold themselves away in their escapist worlds and refuse to confront reality? The disordered nature of Romeo's soul is evident in his professed "love" for Rosamund, which is not reciprocal, as was Portia's and Bassanio's, but rather one entirely born of Romeo's romantic erotic fantasies.

The dominance of eros in Romeo's life is evident when he complains to Benvolio



that "She'll not be hit with Cupid's arrow". The object of his obsession insists instead upon "chastity" which Romeo takes as a sign of her being "childish". His manipulative egotism could not be clearer. According to Romeo, the cause of his suffering is her immaturity and not his. Much like a modern user of dating apps, Romeo finds it suits his purposes to swipe Rosamund and replace her with the unknowing Juliet.

Romeo's capacity for impetuous violence when he kills Tybalt is a further worrying sign of his disordered state. His imprudent decisions prior to and after his marriage to Juliet, indicate he is ill-suited to being a husband. His failure to manfully approach the Capulets is the beginning of his mistakes and the consequent deception entraps them both as it also comes to define their love.

The remainder of the saga is much like a car crash in which the audience can only watch the consequences of Romeo and Juliet's recklessness. The double suicide of Romeo and Juliet shows that they have brought this destruction upon themselves. St Paul reminded the Romans that the wages of sin is death. Romeo earns his share of those wages and causes every other character in the play to be paid in the same currency.

In stark contrast to *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice* is a parable of the Christian principle of life-giving love that is stronger than death. It is a love that "blesses him that gives, and him that takes". It is a selfless love that "hazards all" and just like the forgiving father of the prodigal son from that other famous parable which Shakespeare appropriates, mercy and forgiveness are boundless and unconditional. If *The Merchant of Venice* is about the triumph of good parenting in the love of Antonio for Bassanio and in the wisdom of Portia's father, *Romeo and Juliet* shows the dangers of bad and neglectful parenting in the failure of the Capulets and Montagues to engage with the lives and loves of their daughter and son. Whilst both plays are principally about romantic love, it is only *The Merchant of Venice* which exemplifies how romance must place eros at the service of agape. Whilst the comedy of *The Merchant of Venice* proposes this ideal, the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* shows the deadly consequences of the ideal's absence.

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