

“Domestic Carnage” and the Shakespearean Tragedy

Titus Andronicus, Romeo and Juliet, King Lear

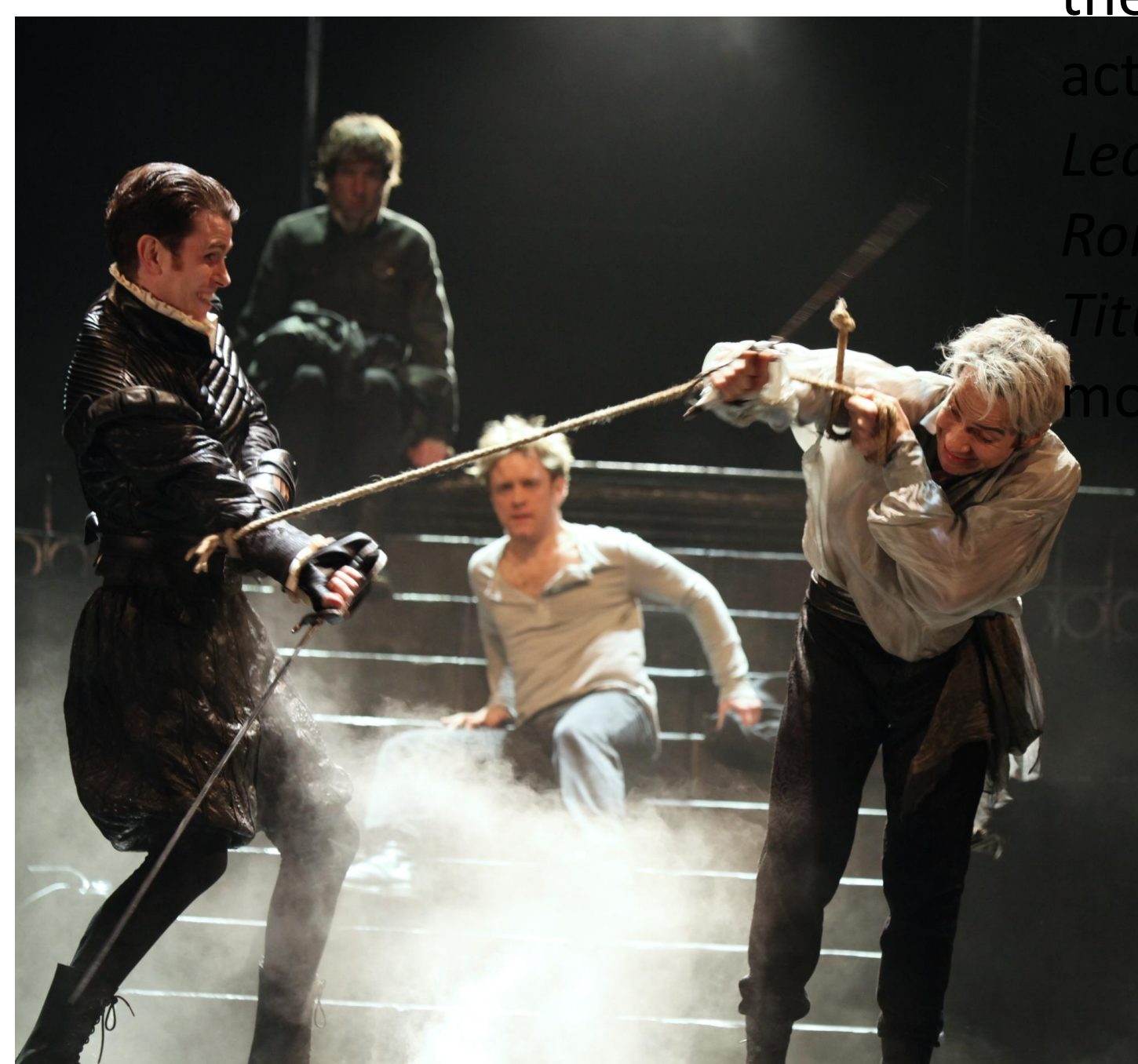
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Parents vs. Children: Initiating the Action

A brawl erupts on the streets of Verona. An aging king abdicates the throne and disowns the daughter who loves him. A renowned general sacrifices the son of his enemy in order to even the score. In these three tragedies, the readers and spectators are almost immediately immersed in a world of violence and violent people. The dramatist pits parent against child, child against parent, but what varies among these three plays is which generation is in control, which generation is on the receiving end of the violence, and just how extreme these acts of violence can be in performance. In this first subsection of my paper, I explore the beginnings of



A 2010 RSC production of Romeo and Juliet

these plays and identify the initiating actions (the abdication and love test in *Lear*) or the societal codes (the feud in *Romeo and Juliet*; pagan obligation in *Titus Andronicus*) that set the play's tragic events in motion.

Sources consulted: **The RSC King Lear**; **Coppelia Kahn's "The Coming of Age in Verona"**; **Susan Snyder's "Beyond Comedy"**; **Nicholas R. Moschovakis's "Irreligious Piety' and Christian History: Persecution as Pagan Anachronism in Titus Andronicus"**

Presence and Absence

In this section, I discuss the presence and absence of parents (both biological and surrogate) in *Romeo and Juliet*. I note that the dramatist never stages a scene in the Montague house, nor do we ever see Romeo sharing a scene with his parents—they keep narrowly missing one another, exiting and entering within (what can be in performance) mere seconds of one another. I establish the following parallels: While Romeo's parents are physically absent from his life, Juliet's parents remain emotionally distant from her. While Romeo is physically banished from Verona after killing Tybalt, Juliet undergoes an internal isolation after refusing to marry Paris. The surrogate parents (the Friar and the Nurse) attempt to assist the two lovers, but ultimately fail because these two figures “have no place in the new world brought into being by Mercutio's death, the world of limited time, no effective choice, no escape. They define and sharpen the tragedy by their very failure to find a part in the dramatic progress” (Snyder 65).



Surrogates Unite!: The Nurse, Juliet, and Friar Lawrence

Sources consulted: **Rozett's "The Comic Structures of Tragic Endings"**; **Snyder's "Beyond Comedy"**

The Point of No Return: When a Tragic Ending Becomes Inevitable

The subject of discussion in this subsection is what I identify as the turning point in these tragedies, or the moment when it's clear to the audience (and maybe even to the characters themselves) that a tragic ending to the action is all but inevitable. I specifically analyze the shift from comedy to tragedy in *Romeo and Juliet*—a shift that coincides with the death of the play's comic figure Mercutio. In addition, I explore the following questions: what elements of a traditional Shakespearean comedy precede and also remain after the shift from comedy to tragedy in *Romeo and Juliet*? With this in mind, how then does Shakespeare transform *Lear* from a romance into a tragedy, and what elements of the original source's comic structure remain intact?

Sources consulted: **Stanley Cavell's "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear"**; **Snyder's "Beyond Comedy"**; **Snyder's "Between the Divine and the Absurd: King Lear"**



“Rebellious subjects, enemies to peace,
Profaners of this neighbour-stained steel—
Will they not hear?” (1.1.77-78)

The Daughters of Tragedy/ The Tragedy of Daughters



Kevin Kline as Lear and Kristen Bush as Cordelia in a 2007 production at the New York Public Theater

In these three tragedies, three virtuous daughters, Lavinia, Juliet, and Cordelia, are killed in the play's final moments. They fall victim to the play's tragic action, but can all three women really be classified as “victims”? Some critics characterize Lavinia as representative of the one-note “victim” archetype, but does that mean the audience cannot be moved when her father sacrifices her in order to preserve honor? Cordelia is cast out by Lear in 1.1 and later cast down for him in the play's closing moments—is she a victim, too? What is it about her death that disturbs us? After exploring these questions, I turn my discussion to Juliet, and assert that the daughter of Capulet, in all her complexities, certainly defies the “victim” caricature—she proposes marriage, wills herself to drink the Friar's potion, and eventually takes her fate into her own hands.

Sources consulted: **Jack E. Reese's "The Formalization of Horror in Titus Andronicus"**; **Catherine Stimpson's "Shakespeare and the Soil of Rape"**; **Charles Frey's "O sacred, shadowy, cold, and constant queen': Shakespeare's Imperiled and Chastening Daughters of Romance"**