

There's no sex in Shakespeare, kids

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Most of my time in Mrs. Bobbitt's grade 10 English class was spent hiding in the back row writing desperate, angsty letters to my friends who were stuck in other classes or who had dropped out of school. I probably only remember the class because of Mrs. Bobbitt's conspicuous prudery. After slogging through reading *Romeo & Juliet*, we finally got to watch the movie. Our aged teacher rolled out the AV cart with a TV and VHS player, and she dusted off an analogue copy of Zeffirelli's 1968 adaptation of *Romeo & Juliet*. The film was already almost three decades old – an eternity to a teenager. It seemed as dated as our teacher, with her anachronistic beehive and faded tweed suits. Despite the film's similarly old-fashioned haircuts (and tights), we were generally engaged. Romeo and Juliet were beautiful and had found the love that most of us still had no experience with. And then the newly married couple were waking up together, naked in bed. We sat captivated, anticipating their love-making-to-the-rhythm-of-iambic-pentameter, when Mrs. Bobbitt rushed to the television, stood in front of the screen and hit stop on the VCR. As the bell rang, she awkwardly dismissed the class. Despite the dated nature of the film and all of our yawning, we were excited for the next class. Romeo and Juliet were going to have Shakespearean sex! I was titillated. Would Mrs. Bobbitt really show bums and boobs? Could she even know what these were? Unfathomable. As we entered Mrs. Bobbitt's room, the TV was ready at the front of the room, the blue screen beaming into the darkness. Mrs. Bobbitt hit play, but Romeo and Juliet were no longer in bed together – Juliet was visiting Friar Lawrence. I had literary blue balls. There's no sex in Shakespeare, kids.

But, in university, the naughty bits were revealed. With each reading of a Shakespearean play, we uncovered his sexy parts. New sections, not included in the high school editions of his plays, appeared. We uncovered the dirty jokes

and sniggered knowingly. And they weren't just gratuitous or for comic relief. They gave the texts an intensity, an irreverence and a relevance that were missing from our high school readings.

When I reread *Romeo and Juliet* in university, I discovered that Mercutio, specifically, reveled in wit and thinly veiled double entendre – presented to titillate the audience. Mercutio is Shakespeare's dirty talker. When Mercutio learns that Romeo has run off following the masquerade, Mercutio makes a series of lewd comments about Rosaline's genitals. Mercutio continues to ridicule Romeo by calling him a blathering idiot desperately trying to "hide his bauble in a hole." This sort of locker room roasting continues throughout the scene until Benvolio interjects, begging Mercutio to stop. However, being told to stop only causes Mercutio to escalate, protesting that his "tale" (penis) cannot be stopped when he is "against the hair" (pubic hair). He cannot resist the opportunity to pun on the idea of coitus interruptus. Just as the conversation veers towards the profane, the Nurse enters and, at first, the young men tone down their sexually charged dialogue. But once again Mercutio cannot resist and he cracks a few jokes at the Nurse's expense, calling her an aging whore who in the end is used up and therefore not worth her charge. Apologetically, Romeo explains to the Nurse that Mercutio is all talk and his sexual inaction is what makes him so vulgar. Like Mercutio, Shakespeare cannot miss an opportunity to play up the sexual charge that exists between these young lovers. Mercutio's vulgarity allows Shakespeare to tease the audience with sexual innuendo without showing it on stage.

But it is not just Mercutio who brings a sexual charge to Romeo and Juliet's relationship. In the high school reading of the play, the Nurse comes across as a ridiculous character who serves Juliet's chaste interests. However, the post-secondary reading reveals her as a woman preoccupied with Juliet's sexual initiation and even the lovers' pimp. In her first scene, the Nurse gives a long speech during which she repeats a crude joke her husband made about Juliet

when Juliet was a toddler. According to the Nurse, when learning to walk Juliet would fall forwards. So the Nurse's husband joked that later, when she had "more wit," Juliet would "fall backward" (into a sexual position). Through this joke, the Nurse presents herself and her husband as aware of, or even involved in, Juliet's sexual life from her earliest age. When the Nurse conspires with Romeo and Juliet later in the play, and acts as their sexual go-between, Mercutio calls her out as a "bawd." Despite these accusations, the Nurse proceeds to arrange the marriage between the lovers and continues to use sexually charged language, reminding Romeo in one scene that Paris would also like to lay his "knife" (penis) aboard Juliet. In the subsequent scene, when the Nurse reports back to Juliet, the Nurse comments that while she has done the work to arrange the match, Juliet will soon bear the (sexual) "burden" on her wedding night. The Nurse finally fulfills her role as the bawd when she arranges for Romeo to join Juliet to, presumably, consummate their marriage.

Discovering the bard's bawdiness allowed me to experience his plays more like a Sixteenth Century Globe Theatre patron, with an awareness of Shakespeare's comedic boundary pushing alongside his serious literary meaning. But Shakespeare's sexiness became most problematic for me when I became a teacher. I wanted to show my students that Shakespeare was more than just a boring old poet, but I was afraid of revealing too much. It wasn't a puritanical impulse. Rather, it was because I could be fired. I had a temporary contract and, worse yet, I was a young woman. Like Shakespeare, I risked being shut down for lascivious content. (Shakespeare worked under the authority of the Master of the Revels, a sort of Elizabethan vice principal, whose whims could shut down his productions for being obscene.) So instead of using sex, I would sell Shakespeare with Hollywood.

I dashed to the Blockbuster Video (when those still existed) and rented the latest version of *The Merchant of Venice*. This new version of the play was shiny and new, featuring a still-relevant Al Pacino (instead of the ancient Lawrence

Olivier from the John Sichel adaptation). Scarface playing Shylock was going to sell itself. But just a few scenes in and I was mortified. The costume designer was smiting me all the way from the streets of Venice. The Venetian prostitutes in the film were savvy business women who advertised their wares by wearing corsets tucked under the bust and by painting their nipples bright red. I cursed this wretched perfectionist and her desire for historical accuracy. Now I couldn't avoid sex in Shakespeare.

Tentatively, I approached my principal in the staffroom. "So, Pete...I am teaching *The Merchant of Venice* to my grade nines this year.... I would love to show them the new Al Pacino film version. There's one catch: There are nipples all over the place." Casually, Pete inquired about the grade and vetoed the showing of nipples to fourteen- year-old boys. He and I knew that they would not be able to hear "hath not a Jew eyes" when their eyes were glued to the extras' apple-red nipples. No, sex and Shakespeare could not mix here, not in this Bible belt small town and not with a bunch of hormonal teenagers. Nevertheless, I showed the movie. But I had a plan. For each of my classes that year, during the nipple-ridden scenes, I faced the television towards the board or draped it with a cape that I kept on hand for student re-enactments. I wondered though, "*Had I become Mrs. Bobbitt?*"

Now, as a teacher with a permanent contract and a decade of experience, I finally feel free to sell Shakespeare with sex. I feel a bit like I am striking a deal with my students, in the spirit of the Nurse (only less crude). The deal is: You read Shakespeare and I will let you have a little lust in your literature. When I introduce my class to *Romeo & Juliet*, I emphasize the fact that some of the jokes are so dirty that I can't explain them. I hint that if they read the opening scenes closely, they might get the too-hot-for-school jokes. Arguably, at this point in my career (and in this age of sex-saturated media), I could get away with revealing a bit more. Yet, I resist explaining the Mercutio passages. I resist, not because I am a prude, but because a joke that has to be explained

loses much of its humour. Slogging through an explanation of what the Nurse means by “fall backward” kills the joke’s comic effect.

I still use Hollywood too, but I embrace the sexy adaptations now. This year I showed Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* to students. I chose this version in part because of the big names featured in the film (although Leonardo DiCaprio is now ancient by teenage-girl standards). However, I know that this version is sexier due to the ultra violence of a future Los Angeles. The students love the familiarity of the cartoonish setting, costumes and acting. While the nudity is far less exposed than the Zeffirelli version, Baz Luhrmann’s version engages the Shakespearean tease in many scenes. The party scene, in which Mercutio performs a suggestive drag show, highlights Mercutio’s flair for the sexually dramatic and outlandish. Similarly, Luhrmann retells the balcony scene as a poolside encounter, which emphasizes the sexual charge between Romeo and Juliet. The kissing in this scene is slow and passionate. The dialogue barely has a chance to creep between the kissing and panting of the lovers. When Juliet climbs out of the pool, Romeo asks if she will leave him “unsatisfied” and she asks coyly “what satisfaction” he expects. The marriage consummation scene is charged with sexual undertones, and the Nurse fulfils her role as a bawd as she helps the lovers scramble back into their clothes when Juliet’s mother returns. In the Luhrmann adaptation, Hollywood finds a way to represent the sexy aspects of *Romeo & Juliet* to reveal the play’s sexuality without ruining its appeal, much like I need to – much like Shakespeare needed to.

Many of my colleagues have stopped teaching Shakespeare, now that it is no longer mandatory. Probably they have surrendered in the face of venerated, but challenging language. But if I can help my students break through the centuries-old verse, Shakespeare’s plays can share their wisdom about sexuality’s longstanding allure and complexity. Sex, like Shakespeare, is “not of an age but for all time.”

I continue to teach Shakespeare because I love to surprise my students, and challenge them to discover just how relevant, funny and sexy his plays can be. My students often think that sexuality is contemporary. They almost never are able to acknowledge that sex and sexuality have been a significant part of human life throughout all of history, certainly in part because the school system won't allow sex to feature in any history or literature. I want to help change that practice and that perception, but I have to be delicate in my approach. Too much sex would be gratuitous and distracting. If I overemphasize the erotic in *Romeo & Juliet*, the fourteen-year-old boys (and girls) would only remember the nudity and none of the nuance. Few of the deeper challenges of love and longing would come through. On the other hand, too little lust makes the love story flat and dispassionate. Like Shakespeare, I must reveal and conceal – to fill seats, to keep audiences engaged, but also to make love believable. It is the same for teenagers as much as adults; lust is a part of love, sex and romance that are inextricably intertwined. To do my job well and make Shakespeare relevant, I need to think like Shakespeare – not like Mercutio with his non-stop sexual banter, and certainly not like Mrs. Bobbitt with her censorship of all things sexual.

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