THEATRICAL PLACING OF PARENTS AND STAGING SPACE IN *ROMEO AND JULIET*

Maria Georgiana DONICI (BOGDAN)
Ovidius University of Constanta

Abstract: *This essay focuses on the traditional familial structures that developed through biological parent-child bonds in Shakespeare's* Romeo and Juliet *(1595), in the light of geocritical and performance studies that analyse the use of stage space and the play's setting. The ability to give birth and nurture children offered women the opportunity to be active participants in shaping both the household and society in early modern England. Yet the apparently normal and traditional family structure of the two feuding families in this Shakespearean tragedy (the Capulets and the Montagues) is placed in an incongruent relation to the imaginary Italian setting. While Verona and Mantua are resonant Italian locations that Shakespeare takes over from his sources, the compression effects of space and time in* Romeo and Juliet *demonstrates that the theatrical placing of these apparently normal (even if at enmity) families offers a deceptive and reversed version of space, in which social space shifts dramatically and it is replaced with metaphoric representations of imaginary locations. My essay suggests that through the theatrical placing of parents in* Romeo and Juliet*, the play dismantles extant understandings of families by establishing private spaces in which characters constitute themselves as subjects. In drama, therefore, parental authority that represents the social backbone of the early modern family is subverted and displaced by the action on the stage. This is the dramatic place of performance, in which representations of location shift with each production.*

Keywords: *environment; family; geocriticism;* Romeo and Juliet*; patriarchy; parents; theatrical space; tragedy*

Romeo and Juliet is a play about two families, each dysfunctional in its own ways, where the fatal agency of the Montagues and the Capulets destroys the children of both families. The same observation applies, in different expressions, to several of Shakespeare's tragedies in terms of family relations: *Titus Andronicus* places warring and hating families in ancient Rome, with terrible instances of cannibalism, rape and dismemberment; in *Macbeth*, the character of the hero's tyranny is shown in contrast with the innocence of Macduff's family, which he destroys; in *Hamlet*, the process of the hero's struggle to identify his own filial duty has direct implications for the family of Polonius, with tragic consequences for the prince himself. Families construct hierarchical positions for their members to occupy, in relation to certain modes of behaviour: living together, parental responsibility, sexual fidelity, heterosexuality. While we are the heirs of two hundred years of family values, in Shakespeare's time things were beginning to change. As Catherine Belsey argues, "we might see Shakespeare's plays as contributing directly to the early modern process of naturalizing the affectionate nuclear family" (133) because

BDD-A31951 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 09:22:21 UTC)

"[r]omantic courtship, marrying for love, and the loving socialization of children by two caring parents were new enough in his day not to pass for nature" (133). Belsey's concept of "naturalizing" the family on Shakespeare's stage highlights the fact that the moment of social change made apparent the anxieties provoked by the family values themselves and the gender models they constructed. In the theatre, as I argue, unlike the social life which it intrinsically represents, this process of naturalization of parents and families has specific reverberations in the minds of the audience, consistent with the space of action.

In the geocritical theory of space and place, best articulated initially by Y-Fu Tuan and later Bertrand Westphal's *Geocriticism*, an individual's experiences inscribe a space (an undifferentiated area), and make it a place; that place and those experiences contribute to that individual's identity. In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Y-Fu Tuan views space as an area of freedom and mobility, while place would be an enclosed and humanized space: "Compared to space, place is a calm center of established values" (Tuan 54). For Tuan, space turns into place when it gains definition and becomes meaningful. As Bertrand Westphal observes in his geocritical interpretation, "Geocriticism probes the human spaces that the mimetic arts arrange through, and in, texts, the image, and cultural interactions related to them" (6). When applying the theories of literary representations of space and place in relation to parents and family structures in *Romeo and Juliet*, since the Elizabethan stage did not represent any particular space (because of lack of décor), the stage could be imagined as any place necessary or convenient for the scene. Verona and Mantua are Italian locations that Shakespeare adapts from his sources,[1] but the compressed ways in which these places are represented on stage differ in accordance with the production space. I argue for the concept of "placing" of parents and families on the early modern stage, in the sense that the arrangements of location in each scene reflect the specific social, political, cultural and emotional situations in which parents and families are placed.

The convergence of historical and political factors is another type of relation that the parental family shares with society at a certain time. In this respect, the play's space of action is connected with history, politics, and society. Catherine Richardson highlights the political aspect of Shakespearean tragedy when she states: "If tragedy is a political genre, then one aspect of its power is its conception of family and

[1] In "*Romeo and Juliet* before Shakespeare," Jill L. Levenson discusses the well-known story of the sources: the Italian novella by Luigi daPorto, *Historia novellamente ritrovata di due nobili amanti*, 1530; Mateo Bandello's version in his *Novelle* (1554); Boaistuoau's translation of Bandello in his *Histoires tragiques* (1559); Arthur Brooke's verse translation into English of Boaistuoau, entitled *The Tragicall Historie of Romeus and Juliet* (1562, generally accepted as Shakespeare's immediate source); and William Painter's prose translation of Boaistuoau included in the collection *The Palace of Pleasure* (1567). Shakespeare dramatized these stories, focusing on the dramatic method and construction of character. As Levenson observes, "Constituting the lineage of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, these novellas transmitted the story from Italy across the Alps to England" (327) and "Throughout its extensive journey, the narrative steadfastly resisted alteration" (327). Levenson also observes the sense of urgency in Shakespeare's dramatic version of the story, which "accelerates disaster" (346), because the play "anatomizes the very conventions in which it originated" (347).

BDD-A31951 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 09:22:21 UTC)

household" (17); from a new-historicist perspective, Richardson calls this aspect of power relations "a crucial political tool" in early modern England. Since space shapes human behaviour, the environment of dramatic action is crucial to the development of our understanding of stage space. In "Making Room, Environments of Entertainment in *Romeo and Juliet*," Julia Reinhard Lupton discusses patterns of hospitality and celebration in the play by showing the "dispositions of space that are at once urban, domestic, agrarian, and political-theological" (145). Reinhard Lupton calls this space of hospitality in *Romeo and Juliet* "an *environment of entertainment*, a space of welcoming that is always incipiently theatrical" (146). From this environment of entertainment, which is represented mostly by the Capulets' house at the party, I draw my argument for a theatrical placing of parental issues within the milieu of the theatre as shaped by language. Lynette Hunter introduces the term "echolocation" (259) to show the "logical power of figuration" (259) suggested by the specific rhetorical strategies in *Romeo and Juliet*. As I argue in relation to the ways in which parenthood and family are located on stage in *Romeo and Juliet*, language and action destabilizes social and historical significances related to traditional hierarchical structures to open flexible ways of interpretation, according to the reader, audience, or theatre practitioner.

If we attempt to locate the play-text of *Romeo and Juliet* that we have before us into the physical space of the open-air non-illusionistic, non-naturalistic type of Elizabethan theatre, the question of location becomes much more complex. Where do events actually occur in the play? As there was little or no movable scenery on the Elizabethan stage, the stage could not represent location. Time and place had to be either signalled by convention, or announced in the script itself, or supplied by the imagination of the spectators. As the Prologue announces, "In fair Verona, where we lay our scene" (Prologue 2),[2] so the playscript tells directly the place of action, but there are several dramatic places in Verona. Alternatively, darkness could never be made apparent on the Elizabethan stage, as in a modern theatre, so a night scene would have to be defined by dialogue, as when Lady Capulet tells her husband "'Tis now near night" (IV.2.39). Yet this image of darkness in the Capulets' house is also accompanied by a sense of foreboding, because events precipitate towards the tragic end announced by Juliet's apparent death.

The time frame in *Romeo and Juliet* is condensed, and this triggers a different spatial concept. The play's action develops from Sunday to Wednesday, when Juliet apparently dies, so the dialogue between Lady Capulet and her husband (IV.2.36-47)—referred to above—occurs on Tuesday night, when Juliet's parents discuss the daughter's intended wedding to Count Paris. While Lady Capulet still thinks that the ceremony will take place on Thursday, so "there is time enough" (IV.2.36) to prepare the wedding ornaments, as Lady Capulet says, her husband announces briefly, "We'll to church tomorrow" (IV.2.37), that is on Wednesday, which precipitates

[2] References to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* are keyed to the New Penguin edition, edited by T. J. B. Spencer (1967). Acts, scenes and lines are correlated to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

BDD-A31951 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 09:22:21 UTC)

events. Therefore, the space–time continuum is perturbed by human intervention (Lord Capulet's sudden decision of shifting the wedding dates), and this triggers a series of predestined tragic events. It might be inferred that space and time can be manipulated by human agency but the overall plot development shows that the fate of the "star-crossed lovers" (Prologue 6) has been determined beforehand. The dramatic place of the Capulets' house at night, therefore, before the intended wedding feast that turns into a funeral, acquires the emotional dimensions given by each member of the family interacting in the play, especially Juliet's parents.

The scene in the Capulets' house at night appears to mirror a perfectly normal family night, with the rather impatient wife (Lady Capulet) going to help her daughter prepare for the wedding, while the apprehensive husband (Lord Capulet) remains awake and active ("I will stir about" IV.2.39) to settle matters right ("all things shall be well" IV.2.40), as Lord Capulet says. Yet everything is an illusion. Juliet pretends to go to prepare the "needful ornaments" (IV.2.34) for her wedding but, in fact, she organises her apparent death; Lady Capulet is rather disappointed because of the advancement of the wedding by one day, so she expresses her worry of not having time to arrange everything: "We shall be short in our provision" (IV.2.38); whereas her husband instructs Lady Capulet to help Juliet in her attire and announces he will not go to bed, and he takes over the responsibility of a dutiful wife to arrange the wedding: "I'll play the housewife for this once" (IV.2.43). What appears to be a perfectly normal Elizabethan patriarchal family life on the eve of a wedding ceremony is actually distorted and the traditional roles are reversed: Juliet lies to her parents; Lady Capulet is worried; and Lord Capulet spends a sleepless night taking over the household duties of the wife: looking for the baked meats and instructing the servants to fetch drier logs and inspect the musicians (IV.4.5-24). This reversal of traditional roles in the family, in which the figure of authority, the father, takes on the more menial duties of the wife, shows that this particular family is placed in uncommon circumstances. The music played early in the morning (at three o'clock, IV.4.3), in rehearsal for the wedding, foreshadows the funeral atmosphere of Juliet's death, because, at this moment, Juliet is apparently dead in her room, so the place of stage performance overlaps with what occurs offstage.

Space is a volatile concept in Elizabethan theatre and it most always turns into the place of the stage, the emotional and distorted environment of tragic action, in which characters interact in various ways. In "Stage, Space and the Shakespeare Experience," J. L. Styan identifies five types of stage spaces in Shakespeare's plays: (1) "the space that joins," which calls for "a recognizable intimacy of speech" (27); (2) "the space that divides" (27), which distinguishes between an actor who is intimate with the audience and another who is not; (3) the space that "simultaneously joins and divides the stage and audience" (27); (4) the "deceptive division of space" (27); and (5) the space that "can be seen to tell lies" (Styan 27). Looking at this scene from *Romeo and Juliet* (IV.2) from Styan's perspective of space, I could say that the space of the Capulet house at night, before the wedding, is the deceptive space, or the space that can be seen to tell lies, because all roles are reversed and no character respects his/her socially allotted place: Juliet is already married to Romeo and

BDD-A31951 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 09:22:21 UTC)

pretends to accept the fictional marriage to Count Paris as a form of deception arising out of the fear of not fulfilling her social role as a daughter; the Nurse is aware of Juliet's deception and goes along with the fake game of preparing for the wedding; Lady Capulet pretends to prepare her daughter for the wedding ceremony but, in fact, she is worried that there is no time for planning; and Lord Capulet takes over female roles in the house and thus reverts the socially ascribed patriarchal order.

Another way of placing families in *Romeo and Juliet* is through the perspective of the servants and the inter-relational civic space they create. In Shakespeare's time, servants were an integral part of the extended family. Discussing politically the cultures of civility, in "The Civil Mutinies in *Romeo and Juliet*," Glenn Clark observes "the displacement of frustrated rage founded in attenuated love or devotion to his superiors" (283) that characterizes Sampson and Gregory's attitude when they successfully provoke some Montague men into fight (I.1.1-63). When Gregory says, "The quarrel is between our masters and us, their men" (I.1.18-19), as Clark notes, "it is hard not to hear this as a claim to intra-domestic conflict between masters and servants, rather than as a claim to honorific inter-household conflict between Montagues and Capulets" (283). When looked at from the perspective of the placing of parents and family on stage, this scene offers ample scope for dialogue. It is the opening scene of the play and it may be set in a street in Verona; the stage directions merely say: "Enter Sampson and Gregory, with swords and bucklers, of the house of Capulet" (SD I.1). The conflict—involving initially the Capulet servants—escalates and includes Abram (Montague's servant), Benvolio (Montague's nephew), Tybalt (Juliet's cousin on her mother's side) and, finally, Capulet himself. When old Capulet arrives, the fight is in full swing and he calls for a "long sword" (I.1.75). This is the moment when Lady Capulet intervenes and says, "A crutch, a crutch! Why call you for a sword?" (I.1.76). The traditional patriarchal roles in the family are radically reversed: while the father figure (Lord Capulet) pretends to fulfil his role as defender of family values, the wife ironically scolds him by implying that he is too old to carry a sword and get into a fight, when he would need a crutch instead. The feminine voice replaces the phallic and masculine warring symbol of the sword with the humbling walking accessory needed by a cripple. Traditional roles in the Capulet family are reversed and the wife has the upper-hand in this relationship.

During the same fight scene at I.1 in *Romeo and Juliet*, Old Montague arrives with similar warring intentions and "flourishes his blade in spite of me" (I.1.78), according to the angered Capulet. It is clear from the layout of this fight scene that the authority of the two fathers and heads of family is diminished, because both are called "old" ("Old Capulet" SD 1.1.75 and "Old Montague" SD I.1.77). In the same attitude of female defiance of patriarchal authority, Lady Montague is holding her husband back, saying "Thou shalt not stir one foot to seek a foe" (I.1.80), while Lady Capulet is deterring hers. This reversal of traditional familial roles in the street of Verona and the women's function of deterring their aggressive husbands in both language and action show that the play represents parental and familial relations in a distorted manner, as compared to the established view. To these reversed roles are

BDD-A31951 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 09:22:21 UTC)

added the frequent sexual puns and erotic innuendo[3] used by the servants Sampson and Gregory during the street-fight scene, in order to suggest that the two warring families are placed not only in direct love–hatred conflict, but also in reversed social roles. Servants are pugnacious and aggressively provoking the members of the opposite household, while wives are termagant and disobedient, even insulting their husbands.

A similarly disconcerting function related to the placing of servants as members of the family in *Romeo and Juliet* is the role of Peter, a Capulet servant, who invites guests to Capulet's feast. The Capulets' house is a troublesome place in which various tendencies collide and interact in dramatic tension. Peter is illiterate, and it is because of the fact that he cannot read that Juliet meets Romeo. As the only daughter of the noble Capulet family in Verona, Juliet might have never met Romeo, a Montague and an enemy of her family, because Romeo would have never been invited to a Capulet party. However, Peter is illiterate, but he does not tell his master so; therefore, in order to deliver the invitations to Juliet's birthday party to the guests, Peter (the Capulet servant) appeals to Romeo in the street of Verona. Romeo "reads the letter" (SD I.2.63) in which the names of the party guests are mentioned and sees the name of Rosaline (his idealized love) in the invitation letter. This is the moment that triggers the decision for Romeo and his friends to crash the Capulet party by wearing masks; consequently, this is how Romeo sees Juliet for the first time. It might be said that Peter is an agent of destiny, whose illiteracy triggers the tragic action. Had it not been for him, Romeo would have continued to be in love with the lady Rosaline and he would have never encountered Juliet.

Later in the play, in the Capulets' house, the servant, Peter, shows that he is a bad singer too (IV.5.100-140), when he teases the musicians with playing a tune but gives them no money. The placing of this scene is very incongruous because it comes directly after the discovery of Juliet's apparently dead body, and the parents' tragic lamentations are set in direct contrast to the light repartee between Peter[4] and the musicians. Peter was left with instructions from Lord Capulet to supervise the musicians, though he lacks musical skills and is unwilling to admit it. Here again, social roles are reversed: instead of the master of the house commissioning music to the musicians, in this scene it is the servant who wants to hear "some merry dump"

[3] In "Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*," Alberto Cacciedo analyses the sexual innuendo used by Sampson and Gregory in the opening scene of *Romeo and Juliet* (I.1.1-63), observing that "most of the bawdiness is tendentiously directed against women, but here it gestures towards violence" (134), and word play "parallels the imagined swordplay of the violent bawdiness" (135). Similarly, when tracing the development of ideas of sex and death in *Romeo and Juliet*, Clayton G. MacKenzie observes that the play "extends and redefines and even blurs traditional perimeters, creating borderlands of meaning" (23).

[4] In *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574-1642*, performance historian Andrew Gurr documents that the part of Peter in *Romeo and Juliet* was played by the comic actor Will Kempe, whose duties as a clown were well-known and who played "a role in almost every play of his company's repertory" (Gurr 87). Through the use of this actor to play comic scenes in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare recreates a space of action in which tragedy is no longer the sole generic denominator and the comic has a role in the play's artistic generation.

BDD-A31951 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 09:22:21 UTC)

(IV.5.104). Peter's wish to listen to merry music may be in accordance with what a low-class character might want for entertainment, and would even be attuned to the intended atmosphere of the prospective wedding. However, Peter's wish is totally inappropriate in the dramatic context, because the musicians were hired for a wedding, but the house is preparing for a funeral. In their turn, the musicians only care for their lost wages and their lunches. Peter's presence as an agent of fate in the Capulets' house is distorted in this scene and the comic exchange is incongruous. What appears to be a mere musical interlude prepared for a merry wedding feast turns into an odd exchange among servants (members of the extended family), who are unaware of the tragic events occurring in the house. In the Capulet house during early morning, while everybody is preparing for a wedding feast, tragedy strikes unexpectedly. The house is a place of joy and worry, of anger and grief, and of mixed emotions that foreshadow the final tragedy, but also the reconciliation of the families.

The placing of the nuclear parental family in *Romeo and Juliet* is represented as being both in accordance with the traditional patriarchal structures of Elizabethan society (father as the head of family, mother, and son or daughter, as well as servants) and also as being drastically reversed. While, apparently, we witness, on both sides of the dramatic range, two feuding families represented by the Montagues (Old Montague, Lady Montague, Romeo, and servants) and the Capulets (Lord Capulet, Lady Capulet, Juliet, and servants, such as the Nurse and Peter), the traditional roles of parents and the extended family are reversed. The placing of the of action influences the interpretation of parental issues differently. The public space of the Verona street involves conflict and fighting, but also misunderstanding and overturned family roles, when wives control their husbands and servants adopt aggressive behaviour to suit the conflictual atmosphere. Alternatively, in the private space of the Capulets' house at night, before the wedding that turns into funeral ceremony, parental roles are also reversed (Lord Capulet takes on the duties of his wife) and so the emotional expectations are upturned. Thus, in the distorted world of the play, parents and families are placed in tension with each other and in opposition to their traditional roles, while unresolved conflicts are materialized through representations of incongruous public and private spaces that foreshadow disaster. The theatrical placing of families in *Romeo and Juliet*, therefore, takes on the emotional colouring attributed to each character during the dramatic interaction, with each particular stage place speaking for a specific emotional tone.

Works Cited

Belsey, Catherine. "Gender and Family." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Tragedy*. Edited by Claire McEachern. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 132-151.

Cacciedo, Alberto. "Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*." *The Explicator*, vol. 61, no. 3, 2003, pp. 134-137.

BDD-A31951 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 09:22:21 UTC)

Clark, Glenn. "The Civil Mutinies in *Romeo and Juliet*." *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2011, pp. 280-300.

Hunter, Lynette. "Echolocation, Figuration and Tellings: Rhetorical Strategies in *Romeo and Juliet*." *Language and Literature*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2005, pp. 259-278.

Gurr, Andrew. *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574-1642*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Levenson, Jill L. "*Romeo and Juliet* before Shakespeare." *Studies in Philology*, vol. 81, no. 3, 1984, pp. 325-347.

MacKenzie, Clayton G. "Love, Sex and Death in *Romeo and Juliet*." *English Studies*, vol. 88, no. 1, 2007, pp. 22-42.

Reinhard Lupton, Julia. "Making Room, Environments of Entertainment in *Romeo and Juliet*." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* vol. 43, no. 1, Winter 2013, pp. 145-172.

Richardson, Catherine. "Tragedy, Family, and Household." *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Tragedy*. Edited by Emma Smith and Garrett Sullivan, Jr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 17-29.

Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*. Edited by T. J. B. Spencer. London: Penguin Books, 1967.

Styan, J. L. "Stage, Space and the Shakespeare Experience." *Shakespeare in Performance: Contemporary Critical Essays*. Edited by Robert Shaughnessy. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000, pp. 24-41.

Tuan, Y-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

Westphal, Bertrand. *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*. Trans. Robert T. Tally, Jr. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

BDD-A31951 © 2020 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 09:22:21 UTC)