

Friar the Liar: *Romeo and Juliet*, Act IV, Scene 5

Imagine trying to console the parents of a thirteen-year old girl who has just died. Would you be able to convince them that she was “in a better place”? That is precisely the dilemma Friar Laurence faces in Act IV, Scene 5 of William Shakespeare’s tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*. Of course, the friar knows that Juliet is not really dead at that point in the play, but he needs to convince her family that she must be placed in the Capulet tomb as soon as possible (before she wakes and they all believe the zombie apocalypse has begun!). “Peace...for shame!” he says upon hearing the self-pitying monologues of the other characters, “Confusion’s cure lives not in these confusions.” He then proceeds to argue that they should all actually feel happy for Juliet because she is “advanced above the clouds/As high as heaven itself.” As with many of Friar Laurence’s speeches, this is a powerful one, and it is full of the literary elements that make Shakespeare an interesting study. Setting himself up as the dramatic foil to Juliet’s parents, Friar Laurence uses this monologue of blank verse punctuated with poetic couplets to create dramatic irony.

In Act IV, Scene 5, Friar Laurence must set himself up as a dramatic foil to the grief of the Nurse, Paris, and both Capulet parents. A dramatic foil is a character that sharply contrasts with another character, and in this case the Friar is contrasting with all these characters by offering a joyful response to their long, sad monologues about how Juliet’s supposed death will affect them: “The most you sought was her promotion;/For ‘twas your heaven she should be advanced:/And weep ye now seeing she is advanced...?” Friar scolds them for thinking of their own concerns above those of Juliet, in fact suggesting they should feel happy: “For though fond nature bids us all lament,/Yet nature’s tears are reason’s merriment.” In other words, even though it is natural to feel sad at the death of a child, if you think about it logically, she’s actually better off, which should make you happy.” This contrasting attitude about death illustrates how the Friar serves as a foil to all those mourning Juliet’s death, and he does so using classical Shakespearean language to make his argument.

The use of blank verse punctuated by couplets is a common Shakespearean element at work in the Friar’s monologue. Blank verse is the non-rhyming, natural-sounding speech generated by iambic pentameter (ten syllable lines in a pattern of unstressed syllables followed by stressed syllables). This pair of ten-syllable lines illustrates the pattern: “She’s not well married that lives married long;/But she’s best married that dies married young.” The content of these lines illustrate the contrast between a long marriage and a young death, which Friar believes to be desirable. Stress in the first line falls on the words “not” and “long”; in the second line, it falls on “young.” This highlights the contrast the Friar is striving to create: that an early death gets you to paradise much faster than a long marriage does. As is often the case with Shakespeare’s monologues, the couplets in Friar’s speech serve as punctuation that indicates the end of the speech and summarizing the primary claim. The first section of his monologue ends with this previously quoted couplet: “For though fond nature bids us all lament,/Yet nature’s tears are reason’s merriment,” which reminds the other characters to rejoice in something that

they would naturally mourn over. Then, as the scene comes to a conclusion, Friar reminds the others, “The heavens do lower upon you for some ill;/Move them no more by crossing their high will.” In other words, you’ve obviously done something to make God mad, so don’t do anything else like that! This couplet reflects the whole point of the Friar’s presence in the scene: He is trying to get them to move Juliet’s body, which is not really dead, to the tomb so that Romeo can sneak in and take her away.

This brings up the most obvious literary element at work in Act IV, Scene 5: dramatic irony. Dramatic irony is when the audience knows something the characters don’t know, and this scene is one continuous example of that concept. Because we know that Juliet is not really dead but only drugged by Friar Laurence’s potion to look that way, we might even smile as each of the other characters presents a self-serving monologue about how profoundly their loss of Juliet will affect them personally. We recognize the silliness of their petty concerns and ultimately how selfish they all are. But there is another level of dramatic irony at work here as well. We not only know that Juliet isn’t dead, we also know that the Friar is just scamming them with his monologue about how they should all be grateful Juliet died so young. The Friar’s motives are crystal clear to the audience when he says, “O in this love, you love your child so ill/That you run mad seeing she is well.” He is scolding other characters for their self-deceptions and even later chastises them for their offenses to heaven, but he himself is operating a gigantic lie of his own throughout this scene! The audience is in on all of this, but the other characters in the scene are not, hence dramatic irony. Finally, despite the lengths the Friar goes to and the depths to which he deceives the others, the audience is aware all along that this ploy will not work. We already know from the Prologue that “A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life.” In this respect, most of the play is dramatic irony.

Friar Laurence’s monologue in Act IV, Scene 5 of *Romeo and Juliet* illustrates that Friar is a dramatic foil to the grieving characters, models blank verse punctuated with poetic couplets, and serves as a multi-layered example of dramatic irony. Such Shakespearean speeches are not only a joy to listen to, but they also build tension, move the plot forward, and flesh out the characters for the enjoyment and edification of the audience. The Friar himself might say this: When you are required to study Shakespeare, fond nature may bid you lament, but nature’s tears are reason’s merriment!