

Romeo and Juliet essay: Act 4 Scene 3 analysis

Full title: *How does Shakespeare present Juliet's emotions in Act 4 Scene 3?*

Over the course of Act 4 Scene 3 of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet's emotions shift from one extreme¹ to another until the moment she finally drinks the potion and falls upon her bed. She begins by excellently convincing her mother and nurse that she is calm and rational, but her true state of mind is revealed as soon as they leave. Nervous and jittery, she reconsiders drinking the potion but is forced to accept that her options are limited, gradually progressing from a sense of doubtfulness to a complete madness,² distress and irrationality in thought. Nevertheless, she braves her fears and drinks the contents of the vial.

While speaking to the nurse and her mother, Shakespeare presents Juliet as being calm, controlled and collected. Her lines are end-stopped and follow a regular rhythm,³ conveying her composure. So that the Nurse would leave the room, Juliet placates her using statements such as "those attires are best" and calling the Nurse "gentle" in order to flatter her. Juliet, despite her young age, is highly intelligent and uses this to her advantage to deceive the Nurse, a simple-minded character. Religion is her excuse to be left alone tonight, as she mentions "orisons" and "the heavens", masking the truth with religious language and a pretence of devotion. In addition, Juliet is purposefully ambiguous and unclear: "smile upon my state" has a double meaning, in that she could be referring to her thoughts about either Romeo or Paris, and is not explaining reality fully. In particular, her phrase "well thou knowest" makes the most of the intimacy between Juliet and the Nurse, as she lets the Nurse make assumptions about what she means. Her equanimity persists as her mother enters, whose short rapid questions show her brisk and businesslike nature. Juliet is formal, respectful and polite, addressing her mother as "madam", giving no impression of her disobedience. Furthermore, to reinforce this, she uses the formal pronoun "you". Juliet ends her speech by describing the marriage as "so sudden business", implying no joy or emotion at all. Lady Capulet tells her daughter to "get thee to bed and rest", showing that overall, Juliet's rendition of someone calm and in control of their emotions is successful and convincing.

As soon as Juliet is left alone, Shakespeare makes it clear that her calmness was purely superficial, revealing her uncertain and fearful state of mind. From the very beginning of her speech, the phrase "God knows" is profoundly uncertain and emphasises her doubtful nature. The adjective "dismal" marks her move away from the positive and optimistic language of a "smile" that she used when speaking to the Nurse. The alliteration of fricative sounds in the line "faint cold fear thrills through my veins" highlights Juliet's nervousness and fear, while the enjambment of this line shows that she is no longer composed like before. Her uncertain and unclear mindset is revealed in the line "Nurse!—What should she do here?" as she interrupts herself with an exclamation and thus a caesura mid line, showing a total state of confusion and chaos, while the constant rhetorical questions convey her doubt and worry. Juliet's extremely short line "Come, vial" exhibits her poor mental state as she is all nervous, with the imperative 'come' suggesting her reluctance⁴ to proceed with this plan. As her monologue progresses, Juliet's doubtfulness progresses into paranoia, as she gradually loses control of her thoughts. She even begins to wonder whether the Friar is attempting to poison her, with her line "I fear it is, and yet methinks it should not" perfectly summing up her two-faceted reasoning and

¹Do they? How are her emotions *extreme* at the start?

²Can you be less vague?

³What does that mean?

⁴Surely it is more of an attempt to be definitive?

thinking, further emphasised by the caesura. The fact that Juliet considers suicide already shows her distress, but her total desperation is made visible when she refers to the dagger as “thou”, using the informal and intimate pronoun to mention an inanimate object. However, despite the clear deterioration in the clarity of her thoughts, her statement “this shall forbid it” still suggests some remaining firmness and certainty in her decisions. In general, it is clear that as soon as her mother and nurse have left, Juliet’s facade disappears and in her monologue, she lets her true emotions of doubtfulness and confusion gush out.

Throughout Juliet’s speech, there is an obvious theme of death and her fear of it. She constantly alludes to the Capulet’s “tomb”, “vault” and “receptacle”, frightened by the thoughts of what it would be like inside. Her horror is exhibited through her use of rhetorical questions. For example, she asks herself “How if ... I wake before ... Romeo / Come to redeem me?”, ending the question with a caesura to emphasise the shocking aspect of the thought. Juliet’s claustrophobia is particularly evidenced in her use of asphyxiating passive verbs such as “stifl’d” and “strangl’d”, backed up by the personification of the vault’s entrance: the description of a “foul mouth” adds a palpable terror and characterises it as something monstrous, violent and perhaps carnivorous.⁵ She feels that death is inescapable, whichever path she takes, as she ponders the bones and the horror of the fresh corpse of Tybalt, with the word “fest’ring” presenting a horrible image of the body decomposing and falling apart. Yet Juliet’s thoughts become even darker, as the author uncovers her irrationality and she begins to fear the supernatural. Infused with a lexical field of violence, she mentions “spirits” and “mandrakes”, believing the hearsay and descending into madness. As Juliet is “distraught”, she has lost her bravery and ability to think straight, entering a total sensory overload, vividly detailing all her senses, from “loathsome smells” to the mandrakes’ deadly and extreme “shrieks”. Juliet’s repeated exclamations of “Alack, alack” show her highly emotional state as she chaotically panics from the variety and violence of her hideous thoughts. Her long, heavy, enjambed sentences gradually accumulate, emphasising this creeping horror and crescendoing insanity. Finally, Juliet’s thoughts go wild in a macabre and marish ascending tricolon in her final lines. Each line, through anaphora, starts with “and”, the polysyndeton and listing of which shows the build-up of insanity. She describes sinister and strange, illogical ideas, directly juxtaposing playfulness and madness in the phrase “madly play”. Her mind is consumed by thoughts of violence, shown through the semantic field in word choices such as “dash out”, “rage” and “torn”. Unreasonable and irrational fears reach a point that she sees her “cousin’s ghost”, and despite this paranormal activity, she attempts to talk to it, shouting “Stay, Tybalt, stay!”, the exclamation of which strengthens the already clear impression of her insaneness. Her final line, after such an emotional rollercoaster, is hollow, the long vowel sounds in “Romeo, Romeo, Romeo” no longer represent her love, but instead her fear and desperation. However, after all the horror that Juliet went through, it was her love for Romeo that made her accept her fate, and drink the potion.

In Act 4 Scene 3, Shakespeare demonstrates his mastery of conveying a character’s emotions and evoking sympathy from the audience. His word choices create a hysterical and violent atmosphere that is emphasised by techniques such as caesura and varying sentence lengths. Through this monologue, Shakespeare is able to prepare for the incoming tragedy, exploring and communicating to the audience Juliet’s mixed and passionate emotions.

⁵Sentence is doing a bit too much—break it down

Teacher's comments

Mark: 22/25. *Very good. Deep analysis and great coverage. This essay would do very well at Pre-U.*

General advice:

- Avoid vague phrasing—all analysis must be specific and precise
- Be less pretentious—aim for simplicity
- Be careful of analysing syntax—look at word choice far more than caesuras and enjambement
- Make sense of the passage as a whole

See footnotes for specific remarks.