

Romeo and Juliet (Passages Parallel to Lucretius)

Post by "Joshua" of August 24, 2022 at 5:59 PM

Romeo and Juliet: Act 2, Scene 3-- Friar Laurence Lucretius, Book 5: Cyril Bailey translation--various passages

The grey-eyed morn smiles on the frowning night,
Chequering the eastern clouds with streaks of light;
And fleckled darkness, like a drunkard, reels
From forth day's path and Titan's fiery wheel.
Now, ere the sun advance his burning eye,
The day to cheer and night's dank dew to dry,
I must upfill this osier cage of ours
With baleful weeds and precious-juicèd flowers.

The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb;
What is her burying grave, that is her womb.
And from her womb children of diverse kind
We, sucking on her natural bosom, find;
Many for many virtues excellent,
None but for some, and yet all different.

1. The golden morning light of the radiant sun reddens over the grass bejewelled with dew, and the pools and ever-running streams give off a mist, yea, even as the earth from time to time is seen to steam.

2. [...] sun's blazing wheel [...]

3. Without doubt the mother of all is seen herself to be the universal tomb of things.

4. But each thing comes forth after its own manner, and all preserve their separate marks by a fixed law of nature.

O, mickle is the powerful grace that
lies

In plants, herbs, stones, and their
true qualities.

For nought so vile that on the earth
doth live,

But to the earth some special good
doth give;

Nor aught so good but, strained
from that fair use,

Revolts from true birth, stumbling
on abuse.

Virtue itself turns vice, being
misapplied;

And vice sometime, by action,
dignified.

[Friar Laurence holds up a small
flower]

Within the infant rind of this weak
flower

Poison hath residence — and
medicine power,

For this being smelt —

[He smells the flower]

with that part cheers each part;

Being tasted, stays all senses with
the heart.

Two such opposèd kings encamp
them still

In man as well as herbs — grace
and rude will;

And where the worsèr is
predominant,

Full soon the canker death eats up
that plant.

5. Of such great matter is it, what is the power of each
thing.

6. And many there are, which by their usefulness are
commended to us, and so abide, trusted to our tutelage.

7. Indeed, we may see the bearded goats often grow fat
on hemlock,
which to man is rank poison.

8. What was of value, becomes in turn of no worth; and
then another thing
rises up and leaves its place of scorn, and is sought more
and more each day,
and when found blossoms into fame, and is of wondrous
honor among men.

9. Nor in any other way do we see one another to be
mortal; except that we fall
sick of the same diseases as those whom nature has
sundered from life.

10. They unwitting would often pour out poison for
themselves,
now with more skill they give it to others.

What interests me most about these comparisons is the way in which Lucretius restrains from making moral judgments, the way Shakespeare invites his readers to do. You'll notice how much I had to "stretch" the meaning in the last row in Lucretius, in order to vaguely echo that in Shakespeare.

If you struggle to read Shakespeare, as many of us do, I can very heartily recommend the Folger Shakespeare Library's dramatic full-cast reading of *Romeo and Juliet*. Available on Audible!