

# Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* Via Literary Darwinism: LiLT in Kyoto Presentation

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## Abstract

As evolutionary theory has become such a cornerstone of biology, it has been incorporated across many disciplines with consilience, for some, the desired goal. Literature is no exception: the thought being that human evolution has shaped our behavior, thus our literary preferences. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* revolves around aggression and love and is full of examples that illustrate a wide range of evolutionary concepts. Zeffirelli's film version of the play is first viewed by students in a content-based Life Science course. The text of various scenes is analyzed giving intuitive examples that hold a mirror up to our nature.

進化論が生物学の礎となり、異なる分野が分野を越えて学説などの合意に至り一体化してきた。それはある分野には望ましい結果となった。文学においても例外ではない：人間の行動は進化の過程で形作られてきたように、文学嗜好も同じように進化してきたのである。シェイクスピアのロミオとジュリエットの激しい攻撃性や愛といった題材を熟考していくと、それは幅広い進化論の概念で解説することが出来るのだ。ゼフィレリ監督のシェイクスピアは、初めてライフサイエンスの分野から学生に考察されることとなった。様々なシーンの表現は、直感的に我々の本質を映し出す鏡として解析されるのである。

Shakespeare is the cornerstone of the western literary canon (Bloom, 1995) and is performed and revered all over the world. He has been praised by many to the extent that he is revered as a god with his own religion that some call bardolatry. His universal appeal is due to his profound grasp of human nature — “a mirror held up to nature” as Hamlet states. Never one to shy away from controversy, Bloom (1998) has argued that Shakespeare pushed the bounds of what it means to be human, expanding and enlightening our intellectual possibilities. It has been argued Shakespeare is a product of western imperialism — a white male foisted upon the impressionable minds of students by the ivory tower of western academia, and that human nature is a myth (Greenblatt, 1980, O'Toole, 2012, and Taylor, 1991). This relates to culture wars and the nature vs. nurture debate: is the mind a blank slate that is written upon by your environment, or do genes influence our behavior (Pinker, 2002)?

My view is that as human nature is coded into all of us, Shakespeare penned his characters accordingly, and, perhaps more importantly, spending valuable class time on this white western male is time well spent. In my experience most Japanese EFL students have heard of him, and are receptive to learning about this cultural icon; the Shakespeare industry (i.e., the vast cultural, academic, and economic forces that exist to perpetuate Shakespeare) has done its job. Using *Romeo and Juliet* to highlight biological characteristics is also a fillip aimed at cultural determinists as well as support for literary Darwinism (Carroll, 2011).

### **Reasoning**

This is not a literature course, but a content-based (CB) course: Life Science (LS). CB courses should hold students' interest via the subject matter. However, this is not applicable as very few LS students admit to much interest in science. *Romeo and Juliet* and love do interest the students. Zeffirelli's award winning film engages them more than a standard science text will. Also, by nature, humans are interested in narrative and drama which leads to more efficient learning and memory retention (Boyd, 2009, and Gottschall, 2012).

### **Course**

Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* is watched with a few interruptions in order to provide some background of details found in the play but not in the film. Luhrmann's party and balcony scenes are also viewed. Portions of the film and corresponding text from the play are discussed to introduce biological topics: aggression, love, sexual dimorphism, kin selection, parental investment, human universals, mate selection, and finally the adaptive value of art.

The play opens with a brawl that introduces the feud between the two houses: Montague and Capulet. Tybalt illustrates aggression in young males well. I use his wide-eyed angry facial expression when confronting Benvolio to introduce Ekman's universal facial expressions (1971). Students are asked which sex is more aggressive—more inclined to violent crime—and what age range with six age groups for each sex. Students each year correctly and unanimously choose young males. In order to impress that all discussions of human behavior relate to probabilities, not certainties, I relate a personal story: my daughter at age two during a beach outing smashed me in the face with a plastic shovel (not a tiny shovel, but almost one meter in length) when not allowed to drink any of my tea. Extrapolate at your own risk.

Capulet illustrates aggression in middle aged men, particularly his talk with Paris following the Prince's edict that the feud with Montague must end, and at the party. His demand that Tybalt not "in his house do Romeo disparagement" segues to Brown's (1991) human universals—hospitality is found in every culture ever studied.

The feud and the unthinking vehement adherence by each household to it ties into Hamilton's theory of kin selection called inclusive fitness, (Hamilton 1964). This concept is — like knowing that young males are the most aggressive group — intuitively grasped, but the underlying genetic benefits are not. Dawkins's (1976) selfish gene theory follows. It is stressed that humans do not consciously calculate their future returns and genetic benefits, but that our adapted minds (Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992) function in order to do so. Our minds are products of millions of years of evolution in which some mental functions were more favorable than others in negotiating the savannahs and more importantly the treacherously savage politically charged societies of humans. Success meant progeny.

Sexual conflict and parental investment are illustrated by how Juliet and the nurse worry about whether Romeo's intentions are honorable or not. Juliet must be sure that she chooses her mate wisely or face dire consequences. Such is not the case for males. Here, the students compare the parental investment of a female and male and how such influences behavior. Other species such as rabbits are discussed. Of particular interest are sea horses and birds of the genus Phalaropus where the males rear the young. The pronounced effects that this reversal of parental investment causes are discussed in detail.

I discuss mate selection which leads to what is important in a mate for Yanomamo women — unokai (Chagnon, 1968). Unokai men have more status than non-unokai, and father more children. To become unokai a male warrior must kill an enemy. We are all products of our nature and nurture.

Romeo's lustful infatuation with Rosaline and Luhrmann's portrayal of Romeo ingesting the "love drug" ecstasy prior to the party (the students have always missed this) leads to neurotransmitters, and the stages and chemistry of love (Fisher, 2004). Also, the implications of Romeo falling in love with Juliet while tripping on ecstasy provide fruitful discussion: students must think about the ethical ramifications and support their thoughts, and are also curious about such culture. I next discuss the chemical nature of our brain in which all of our reality is interpreted or hashed together.

Some lines from the balcony scene are examined for how emotive they are. I explain that poetry has the power to move us, but what are the survival benefits of creating poetry or any kind of art; how is art adaptive? An artist spends time creating imaginative pieces, time that could have been spent procuring food or a mate. Art (e.g., music, drama, and literature) is a human universal (Brown, 1991), so there must be some biological payoff. Various competing theories of why humans value art are discussed (Barash, 2012, Boyd, 2009, Dissanayake, 2012, Miller, 2000, and Pinker, 1997), though the naughty thumb of science has not demystified the art riddle: yet.

#### Author's Note

John Frederick Maune's interests include evolutionary psychology, literary Darwinism, and mind, brain, and education. He has presented on various topics therein, recently at NeMLA 2016, Atiner 2016 Conference on Literature, JALTCALL & the Brain 2016, and HBES 2016.

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