[*Romeo and Juliet*] appears to be a tragedy of fate, showing its protagonists as the helpless, innocent victims of arbitrary powers. Several incidents in the play contribute to this impression. The Prologue refers to 'a pair of star-crossed lovers' [Prologue, 6]. Romeo's misgivings, aroused in him by an ominous dream, are not wholly dismissed by his friends' jesting mockery as they urge him on to the feast at the house of Capulet. Intuitively he fears the outcome of the evening's adventures:

my mind misgives  
Some consequences yet hanging in the stars  
Shall bitterly begin his fearful date  
With this night's revels and expire the term  
Of a despised life closed in my breast  
By some vile forfeit of untimely death.  
But He, that hath the steerage of my course,  
Direct my sail!  
[I. iv. 106-13]

Explicitly, Romeo surrenders himself to the guidance of God and the imagery which he employs stresses his view of himself as entirely helpless in determining his own destiny. So, when his awkward attempt to intervene in the fight between Tybalt and Mercutio leads to the fatal wounding of his friend, Romeo despondently asserts 'I thought all for the best' [III. i. 104]; the implication is that man's motives and plans fail to bring about the desired end where Fate decrees otherwise. After he has killed Tybalt, Romeo refers to himself as 'fortune's fool,' the helpless victim and plaything of Fortune, and after killing Paris he speaks of both himself and his victim as being 'writ in sour misfortune's book' [V. iii. 82]. Finally, Romeo refers to suicide as the shaking off of 'the yoke of inauspicious stars' [V. iii. 111].

Indeed, an inimical Fate does seem to guide the lovers' lives. It is by unhappy chance that Romeo happens to meet Tybalt and it is unfortunate that his movement to part the duelists results in Mercutio's being wounded. It is unfortunate that old Capulet decides to move Juliet's marriage to Paris forward by one day, thereby making it necessary for her to take Friar Laurence's potion a day earlier and thus shortening the time allowed for bringing Romeo news of the Friar's plan. It is by chance that the Friar's messenger is delayed by the plague while Romeo's own servant reaches Mantua safely to report the supposed death of Juliet. It is unfortunate that Romeo finds Paris at Juliet's tomb, that Friar Laurence trips over the tombstone and arrives too late to prevent Romeo's suicide by revealing the truth. It is unfortunate that the Friar leaves Juliet alone in the tomb upon her awakening, thus giving here the opportunity to kill herself. Fate or Chance do seem to have a hand in determining what happens to these two young lovers and we may well find ourselves futilely wishing 'If only. . . , if only..."

But not only Fate determines the events and outcome of the play. It is noteworthy that in adapting his plot from *The Tragical History of Romeo and Juliet*, a poem by Arthur Brooke published in 1562, the major change that Shakespeare made was drastically to reduce the duration-time of the action from two months to five days. Shakespeare takes great care to impress the speed and swiftness of the action upon his audience and he does this in two ways. Firstly, the days of the week are several times mentioned, so that we may never for one moment forget how quickly the lovers fall in love, marry and are forever parted. The play opens on a Sunday and that same evening Romeo, hitherto infatuated by the fair Rosaline, meets Juliet at the Capulets' ball. Their love is instant and mutual and before dawn they are betrothed. The next morning, Monday, the Nurse comes to Romeo at 9 o'clock and by her he sends word to Juliet, bidding her meet him that same afternoon at the cell of Friar Laurence. Here they are secretly married and on his way home from the ceremony Romeo becomes involved in the quarrel with Tybalt. Having killed Juliet's cousin, Romeo flees to his father-confessor, Friar Laurence, and it is at the Friar's cell that the nurse finds him and bids him come to Juliet that night—their wedding night. The next morning, Tuesday, Romeo leaves for Mantua and Juliet's parents tell her that she must marry her suitor Paris on Thursday or else be turned out of their house. She seeks for counsel in her dilemma from the Friar, who gives her a potion that, if taken on Wednesday evening, will enable her to feign death until Friday, by which time he will have sent for Romeo to take her in secret to Mantua, there to await the pardon of the Prince of Verona. Juliet is so much cheered by the Friar's plan that she returns home, blithe and gay, to consent to the proposed marriage with Paris. Her change of mood so overjoys her father that he moves the wedding forward to Wednesday and Juliet therefore has to drink the potion on Tuesday evening, waking up on Thursday. Meanwhile the Friar's messenger to Romeo is delayed and he hurries off to smuggle Juliet away, not knowing that Romeo, believing his wife dead, has himself hastened back to Verona. On Thursday night—four days after their first meeting—the two lovers are united in death.

The swiftness of the action is emphasised by the tremendous mobility facilitated by the open stage of the Elizabethan playhouse, with its several levels permitting incessant movement from one location to another. The action moves from the front of the stage to the curtained recess at the back, from the lower recess to the upper, with such wonderful fluidity and continuity that there need be not a single pause in what the Prologue refers to as 'the two-hours' traffic of our stage' [Prologue, 12].

The whole effect of the play, then—an effect produced both by the plot and by the stagecraft—is of speed, a speed which is itself in accord with the sudden, swift passion that is being enacted before our eyes. What the play describes is a fierce, passionate love that leads the two young lovers to defy the long-standing feud between their houses, a love that leads both of them to death.

Despite the explicit stress on fate, *Romeo and Juliet* is more a tragedy of character than is generally realised. It seems to me that Shakespeare is here showing the tragic outcome to be the consequence of the passionate rashness of the lovers and, particularly, the result of Romeo's passionate nature and his lack of moderation.

At the opening of the play Romeo is deeply in love with Rosaline, but since she has vowed to remain chaste his love is a hopeless one and we find him indulging in the traditional excesses of the forelorn lover: he is melancholy, shuns company, walks in the woods by night and locks himself in his darkened room by day. To cure him of his love his sensible kinsman Benvolio suggests that he attend the Capulet ball in order to see for himself that Rosaline is not the only pretty girl in the world. Romeo accepts the challenge and Benvolio is proved right. No sooner does Romeo see Juliet than he falls in love with her:

Did my heart love till now? forswear it, sight!  
For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.  
[I. v. 52-3]

Overhearing Juliet's soliloquy, as she stands on her balcony after the guests' departure, Romeo learns that his love is requited. It is at this point that the fact of Juliet's youth emerges as so important; she is not yet fourteen and her youth, innocence and naivete are what emerge most clearly from the famous balcony-scene. Partly because she has no experience of, or desire for, the formal ceremonies of flirtation and courtship, the lovers are contracted even before there has been any wooing. And yet it is the youthful Juliet who has her doubts about the speed of the betrothal:

I have no joy of this contract to-night:  
It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden;  
Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be  
Ere one can say 'It lightens.'  
[II. ii. 117-20)

Romeo, however, seems to have no such fears or presentiments of ill and he hastens off to Friar Laurence to make arrangements for their immediate marriage.

It is now, in Act II, scene iii, that there occurs one of the play's key scenes, a scene which, though it is often excised in modern productions or else performed so as to evoke a response of laughter in the audience, nevertheless affords important clues as to how we are to interpret the play and judge its major protagonists,

Friar Laurence, who has been gathering herbs, comments upon the paradoxical duality of Nature:

The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb;  
What is her burying grave that is her womb.  
[II. iii. 9-10]

All the creatures upon the earth are of an equally mixed quality:

For nought so vile that on the earth doth live  
But to the earth some special good doth give,  
Nor nought so good but strain'd from that fair use  
Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse:  
[II. iii. 17-20]

As an example, he points to one of the flowers in his collection, the scent of which has cordial powers even though to taste of it is fatal. The human parallel is then explicitly stated: grace, the divine power of goodness, and 'rude will', man's natural desire for evil, both exist within man, eternally at war with each other,

And where the worser is predominant,  
Full soon the canker death eats up that plant.  
[II. iii. 29-30]

When Romeo bursts in, full of his new tempestuous passion, Friar Laurence's remarks first remind us of the old infatuation for Rosaline, now so startingly and suddenly cast off in favour of a newer love, and then stress the conclusion to be deduced from this change of heart:

young men's love then lies  
Not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes.  
Jesu Maria, what a deal of brine  
Hath wash'd thy sallow cheeks for Rosaline!  
How much salt water thrown away in waste,  
To season love, that of it doth not taste!  
The sun not yet thy sighs from heaven clears,  
Thy old groans ring yet in my ancient ears;  
Lo, here upon thy cheek the stain doth sit  
Of an old tear that is not wash'd off yet:  
If e'er thou wast thyself and these woes thine,  
Thou and these woes were all for Rosaline:  
And art thou changed? pronounce this sentence then.  
Women may fall, when there's no strength in men.  
[II. iii. 67-80]

Nevertheless, aware that an alliance between Romeo and Juliet may bring about a reconciliation between their families, he consents to marry the lovers, only chiding Romeo's 'sudden haste' once more with the warning counsel 'Wisely and slow. They stumble that run fast' [II. iii. 94]. That last line, reminiscent of Juliet's own qualms, should remain in our minds throughout the rest of the play, for the lovers fail to heed the Friar's warning, even though he repeats it in II. vi, where, trying to temper Romeo's almost manic joy, he says:

These violent delights have violent ends  
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder.  
Which as they kiss consume: the sweetest honey  
Is loathsome in his own deliciousness  
And in the taste confounds the appetite:  
Therefore love moderately; long love doth so;  
Too swift arrives as tardy as too slow.  
[II. vi. 9-15]

Moderation is what the wise Friar counsels; moderation, which the Elizabethans considered essential in all of life because it balances the passions and maintains the rule of reason, the rational will which is the divine element in man that distinguishes him from the beasts.

The scene that follows [III. i] stresses the need for moderation in social transactions, switching away from the love of Romeo and Juliet to the family feud which serves as its background. Meeting the quarrelsome Tybalt, Romeo exercises admirable self-control and obstinately refuses to be drawn into a senseless quarrel. But his fiery friend Mercutio, unable to bear such an insult to his friend's honour, challenges Tybalt and is killed. It is then that Romeo decides to dispense with moderation—and the decision, the choice, that leads to Romeo's action is explicitly stressed as he says:

Away to heaven, respective lenily,  
And fire-eyed fury be my conduct now!  
[II. i. 123-24]

Romeo explicitly dismisses 'respective levity',— sensible, considerate moderation—and allows himself to be guided by the 'fire and fury' which are associated with Hell. Though it is at this point that he refers to himself as 'fortune's fool', it is precisely here that he has chosen his own course of action, giving way to the angry passion which leads to revenge.

It is by senseless passion that Romeo continues to be ruled. Learning that his sentence is to be banishment rather than death, Romeo is neither grateful nor happy at his prince's mercy. Dismissing 'Adversity's sweet milk, philosophy' [III. iii. 55], he rants and raves in suicidal despair, refusing rationally to consider how his situation may be unproved. Again it is the Friar who urges moderation, chiding Romeo's 'womanish' tears and the 'wild acts' which denote the 'unreasonable fury of a beast' [III. iii. 110-11], stressing the grounds for hope and optimism. Though Romeo is temporarily moved to heed the Friar's advice, he remains, essentially, the 'slave of passion', for when he learns of Juliet's supposed death his spontaneous, unreflecting action is to purchase poison and hasten to a romantic death in the arms of his beloved.

The tragic end that befalls the lovers is more the outcome of Romeo's character than the work of a cruel, senseless fate. Romeo's lack of moderation, the readiness with which he succumbs to all forms of passion, his failure to guide and protect his young wife, bring both of them to their untimely death. Just so is it lack of moderation, a senseless pursuit of passion's dictates, that causes the drawn-out family feud, which Shakespeare so brilliantly mocks and satirizes in the opening squabble of the families' servants and in the fiery valour of Tybalt the 'courageous captain of compliments' [II. iv. 20], but the full horror and severe social implication of which he nevertheless brings out in those scenes [I. i; III. ii and V. iii] in which the Prince appears, threatening and reprimanding the culprits. Here, as elsewhere in his plays, Shakespeare sees the lot of the individual in a total social context. To a large extent, the foolish family feud is responsible for the death of the young lovers and the same immoderate passions are responsible both for the feud and for the disastrous outcome of the love-affair. Friar Laurence's hope that the love of Romeo and Juliet will bring peace to their warring parents is fulfilled in all too bitter a manner and 'All are punished' [V. iii. 295].

Despite Romeo's flawed nature, both Romeo and Juliet have our full sympathy. We neither despise nor reject Romeo because of his flaw of passion. It is primarily by conveying the beauty and sincerity of young love that Shakespeare wins over sympathy for the doomed lovers; clearly the lyrical poetry of their exchanges and the intensity of feeling revealed in their final speeches are intended to stress that the love of Romeo and Juliet is not a shallow infatuation like that of Romeo for Rosaline. In fact, it is almost the nature of young love to be as ungoverned by reason as is the love of Romeo and Juliet. But we should not let our sympathy for the lovers blind us to the ultimate moral of the play, to the positive values which Shakespeare here reasserts. And that ultimate moral, here as in others of Shakespeare's plays, is the paramount need for moderation in every aspect of life—the need for man to follow not the dictates of his 'rude will' but the dictates of that 'grace', that divine reason, which God has implanted within him. Reason is most easily upset and distracted by love and this is what we see happening in the case of Romeo. It is not the stars that bring about the lovers' death but rather their passion and the passion of their kinsmen—the destructive passions of unreasonable, immoderate, excessive love and equally unreasonable, immoderate and excessive hatred. (pp. 120-26)

Alice Shalvi, "The First Tragedy: 'Romeo and Juliet'," in *The World & Art of Shakespeare* by A. A. Mendilow and Alice Shalvi, Israel Universities Press, 1967, pp. 119-26.