Critics have usually regarded Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as . . . a Senecan tragedy of inexorable fate; some have emphasized the sinfulness of the young lovers. We cannot deny the role of fate and accident in Shakespeare's play; it is established in the prologue and it runs as a constant theme through all five acts. We would not expect this to be otherwise, for this was the formula with which Shakespeare began. But Shakespeare's play is far more than a tragedy of fate. It is, moreover, not at all a story of just deserts visited upon young sinners, although some critics have found it so. The fate that destroys Romeo and Juliet is not an arbitrary, capricious force any more than it is the inexorable agent of nemesis, which in Senecan tragedy executed retribution for sin. Shakespeare's play is cast in a more profoundly Christian context … ; the "greater power than we can contradict" [V. iii. 153] is divine providence, guiding the affairs of men in accordance with a plan which is merciful as well as just. Out of the evil of the family feud—a corruption of God's harmonious order—must come a rebirth of love, and the lives of Romeo and Juliet are directed and controlled so that by their deaths the social order will be cleansed and restored to harmony. Shakespeare uses the story of the lovers to explore the operation of divine providence, the meaning of a fate which in the ordinary affairs of life will sometimes frustrate our most careful plans. ... It is in Shakespeare's departure from the Senecan tradition he inherited that the particular significance of *Romeo and Juliet* as tragedy lies. Here we see him groping for a tragic design to embody a view of life far more significant and meaningful than what the Senecan stereotypes could afford. (pp. 273-74)

In [the] emphasis upon youth which runs throughout Shakespeare's play, but which is not so evident in his source, we may find a clue to the philosophical pattern Shakespeare imposed upon Senecan tradition. Romeo and Juliet are children born into a world already full of an ancient evil not of their own making. The feud is emphasized in the opening lines of the prologue, and in the opening scene of the play—before either hero or heroine is introduced—the feud is portrayed in all its ramifications, corrupting the social order from the lowliest serving man up to the prince himself, for just as it breeds household rancor, it disturbs also the very government of Verona.

There is a universality in this situation; Romeo and Juliet epitomize the role in life of all men and women, for every being who is born, as the Renaissance saw it, is born into a world in which evil waits to destroy him, and he marches steadily towards an inexorable death. It is a world, moreover, in which his plans, no matter how virtuous, may always be frustrated by accident and by the caprice of a seemingly malignant fate. It is this universality that gives the play its stature as tragedy, for Romeo and Juliet in a sense become prototypes of everyman and everywoman. They attempt to find happiness in a world full of evil, to destroy evil by means of love, for with Friar Lawrence they see their marriage as the termination of the feud, but evil in the world cannot be destroyed; their fate cannot be escaped, and thus, like all men and women, they suffer and die. This is the life journey of all, but Shakespeare's play asserts that man need not despair, for he is a creature of reason with the grace of God to guide him, and through his encounter with evil he may learn the nature of evil and discover what it means to be a man. The ultimate message of Renaissance tragedy is that through suffering man grows and matures until he is able to meet his necessary fate with a calm acceptance of the will of God. The tragic vision and the religious vision spring ultimately out of the same human needs and aspirations.

Shakespeare saw in the legend of *Romeo and Juliet* a story which illustrated neither retribution for sin nor the working out of a blind inexorable Senecan fatalism. He saw a story that might be used to portray the maturation of youth through suffering and death. *Romeo and Juliet* may thus be called an "education" play, drawing upon the established morality tradition of such plays as *Nice Wanton* and *Lusty Juventus*. Romeo and Juliet learn the fundamental lessons of tragedy; the meaning of human life and death. Their education can culminate only in death and then rebirth in a world in which evil has no place. We can thus see Shakespeare in this play combining a story already cast for him in Senecan mold with a quite alien medieval dramatic tradition, which in its origins was based upon peculiarly Christian assumptions.

Romeo and Juliet are foolish, of course. They are hasty and precipitous and they make many mistakes, but to speak of a "tragic flaw" in either of them is to lead to endless absurdity. The impetuosity, haste, and carelessness of the lovers are the universal attributes of youth. Their shortcomings are what make them the ordinary representatives of humanity that this type of play must have as its tragic protagonists. Their errors, moreover, are all committed with a virtuous end in view, the same end that leads the wise and mature Friar Lawrence to marry them in spite of the dangers he sees both to them and to his own position. Unlike a later Othello or Macbeth, they are guilty of no deliberate choice of evil.

Both Romeo and Juliet mature greatly as the play unfolds, but to demonstrate the particular progress of the human life journey, Shakespeare concentrates upon Romeo. The exigencies of drama required that he concentrate upon one figure, and Romeo, of course, was the natural one. The Renaissance generally held that woman's powers of reason were somewhat less than those of man, and the design of the play called for a free-willed rational acceptance of the Christian stoic view of life to which Romeo comes at the end of the play.

How can a man live in a world in which evil lurks on every side and in which the inevitable end of all man's worldly aspirations must be death, a world in which the cold necessity of Fortune cannot be avoided? The Renaissance had a very simple answer which it carried over from the consolation philosophy of the Middle Ages, itself a Christian adaptation of the classical creed of Stoicism. Good and evil are in the world together, but the entire universe is ruled by a benevolent God whose plan is deliberate, meaningful, and ultimately good. The paradox of the fortunate fall taught that evil itself contributed to this ultimate good. Man, bearing the burden of original sin, had evil within him, but as the chosen creature of God, he had good also. When the evil within him predominated he was ruled by passion, but he had the gift of reason, which by proper exercise could always keep passion under control. Reason, of course, lay in an acceptance of the will of God. This central core of Renaissance belief is perfectly expressed by Friar Lawrence:

For naught so vile that on the earth doth live  
But to the earth some special good doth give.  
Nor aught so good but, strain'd from that fair use  
Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse:. . .  
Two such opposed kings encamp them still  
In man as well as herbs, grace and rude will;  
And where the worser is predominant,  
Full soon the canker death eats up that plant.  
[II, iii. 17-20, 27-30]

Grace, of course, is reason, and rude will is passion. Man can live happily in the world if he allows his reason to guide his actions, to show him that the plan of the world essentially is good and just and that evil itself is designed to further the ends of a divine providence. With reason thus guiding him, man can become impervious to the blows of Fortune. He will accept his fate, whatever it maybe, as contributing to a divine purpose beyond his comprehension but ultimately good and just. Through his encounter with evil Romeo learns to accept his fate in just such a manner.

We first meet Romeo as a lovesick boy assuming the conventional role of the melancholy lover, playing a game of courting a Capulet girl who he knows can never accede to his suit. We may well believe that it is because Rosaline is a Capulet that Romeo pursues her, and that because she knows the basic insincerity of his suit, she spurns him with her supposed vows of chastity. This is the boy Romeo, not yet ready to face the responsibilities of life, unaware of the real sorrows that are the lot of man, but playing with a make-believe sorrow that he enjoys to the fullest. We usually think that at his first sight of Juliet he abandons this childish pose and experiences true love. This may be so, for the dramatist is forced to work rapidly even at the expense of character consistency, but it is not really the sight of Juliet that causes him to change. It is his own precipitous act of leaping out from the dark beneath her window with his

I take thee at thy word:  
Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized;  
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.  
[II, ii. 49-51]

With this hasty speech the game of make-believe love becomes no longer possible. The hasty act of impetuous youth is the means to maturity. Romeo must now face the realities of life with all its consequences both for good and evil. There may be a double meaning in that final line. Never again will he be the same Romeo who had pined for Rosaline. Juliet too can no longer be the same once she has poured her heart out into the night. She too must now face the world as it is. Her unpremeditated outpouring of her love parallels the precipitous speech of Romeo.

Like all young people, Romeo and Juliet are uncertain and hasty in their first encounters with the problems of reality. Their plans at best are foolish ones. The force of evil had already intruded into their world immediately following Romeo's first sight of Juliet. His first poetic rapture [I. v. 44-53] had been echoed by the harsh voice of Tybalt:

This, by his voice, should be a Montague.  
Fetch me my rapier, boy.  
[I, v. 54-5]

This is Shakespeare's unique poetic way of showing the ever-present juxtaposition of love and hate, good and evil. Before the marriage may be consummated, Romeo must now face this evil force in the world. He is not yet, however, able to accept it as he should. When Tybalt lies dead at his feet and a full awareness of what he has done comes upon him, Romeo cries out in despair: "O, I am fortune's fool" [III. i. 136]. This is a crucial line and all its implications must be understood. "Fool" had two common meanings in Shakespeare's age. On the one hand it had the connotation of "dupe" or "plaything," and thus the word usually is glossed. On the other hand it was a common word for "child." In three other places in the play it is used with this meaning. When Romeo calls himself the "dupe" or "plaything" of Fortune, he is asserting a capricious, lawless Fortune, and thus he is denying the providence of God, of which in the Christian view Fortune was merely the agent. Romeo here sees the universe as a mindless chaos, without guiding plan; he is proclaiming a philosophy of despair.

With this view of life the secondary meaning of "fool" is in complete accord. As long as man sees Fortune as capricious and the universe as without plan, he must be the slave of Fortune. Romeo is the child of Fortune at this point because he is governed by it as the child is governed by his father. He is constrained to blind obedience. He has not yet learned the way of acceptance by which the control of Fortune maybe thrown off. When Romeo's own will is in accord with the universal plan of God, he will no longer be the child of Fortune in this sense. He will be the master of Fortune in that it can never direct him contrary to his own will. In this secondary sense of "child" there is also the implication that Romeo is more fortunate than he himself perceives, that he is protected as the child is by his father. The divine providence whose "fool" he is will lead him, in spite of his present ignorance, to a self-mastery and wisdom, and it will use his present seeming misfortune to restore harmony and order to the world.

From this low point Romeo must make his slow journey to maturity, and Shakespeare shows his progression in three stages. First we find him in the friar's cell, weeping and wailing, beating his head upon the ground and offering to kill himself. This abject surrender to passion is the behaviour not of a rational man but of a beast, as the friar declares:

Hold thy desperate hand:  
Art thou a man?  
Thy form cries out thou art:  
Thy tears are womanish; thy wild acts denote  
The unreasonable fury of a beast.  
[III, iii. 108-11]

Romeo's education now begins at the hands of Friar Lawrence, who in a lengthy speech [III. iii. 108-54] teaches him to make a virtue of necessity, that to rail on Fortune is foolish and fruitless, that careful reason will demonstrate to him that he is indeed far more fortunate than he might have been. When rather than kill himself he stops his weeping and goes to comfort Juliet, he has taken the first step toward maturity.

That his growth is a steady one from that point forward we may perceive from a bare hint as Romeo climbs from Juliet's window to be off for Mantua. "O, think'st thou we shall ever meet again?" [III. v. 51] asks Juliet, and Romeo replies:

I doubt it not; and all these woes shall serve  
For sweet discourses in our time to come.  
[III, v. 52-3]

What is significant here is that Romeo has thrown off despair and can face the future with some degree of hope in an ultimate providence. It is but the barest hint of a change in him, and we see no more of him until the beginning of Act V, where in Mantua we perceive by his first words that he is a new man entirely. All of Act IV had been devoted to Juliet. The dramatist has not had time to show in detail the growth of Romeo. The change must be made clear in Romeo's first speech, and it must be accepted by the audience as an accomplished fact. We immediately sense a new serenity about him as he walks upon the stage at the beginning of Act V:

My dreams presage some joyful news at hand:  
My bosom's lord sits lightly in his throne;  
And all this day an unaccustom'd spirit  
Lifts me above the ground with cheerful thoughts.  
[V, i. 2-5]

He expects joyful tidings, but the news Balthazer brings is the most horrible of which he can conceive. Shakespeare gives his opening speech to Romeo, I believe, so that it may emphasize the shock of the news of Juliet's supposed death coming when happy news is expected, and in the face of this shock to illustrate the manner in which the new Romeo can receive the severest blow of which Fortune is capable. (pp. 274-81)

The design of the tragedy does not call at this point for a Byronic defiance of fate by Romeo, a daring of Fortune to pour its worst upon his head. . . .The design calls for an escape from Fortune's oppression through an acceptance of the order of the universe, and this meaning is implicit in "I denie you Starres" [V, i. 24].

We may ask first what the word "deny" means in the context in which Shakespeare here uses it. We do not have far to look, for in the second act we find a significant clue. Here Juliet speaks:

0 Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou  
Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name.  
[II, ii. 33-4]

She is asking wistfully that Romeo not be the son of his father, and her wish falls naturally into two parts: that he give up the name of his father and that he break the bond which ties him to his father. To "deny" his father is to negate the natural relationship of son to father, one, as the Renaissance saw it, of subjection and obedience. It is thus, in Shakespeare's sense, to cast off his father's authority, to refuse to be ruled by him. "I denie you starres," the line editors have consistently refused to accept as Shakespeare's, is the very line with which Romeo attains the victory over circumstances which is the sign of the mature stoical man. It is probably the most crucial single line of the play. To deny one's stars is to throw off the control of a hostile fortune, just as a son might throw off the control of his father. To Renaissance man there was only one means by which this might be accomplished: by an acceptance of the way of the world as the will of God, and by a calm, fearless acceptance of death as the necessary and proper end of man, which releases him from all earthly evil and assures him of a true felicity in heaven. For Romeo this will be reunion with Juliet.

It has been argued, of course, that since the Anglican church taught that the punishment for suicide was damnation, Romeo and Juliet in killing themselves are merely assuring the loss of their souls. We are not dealing here, however, with Shakespeare the theologian illustrating a text, but rather with Shakespeare the dramatist using symbolically a detail inherited from his sources in order to illustrate a greater and more significant truth. The Senecan tradition in which the story came down to Shakespeare endorsed suicide as a means of release from a world full of pain and as a means of expiration for complicity in the death of a loved one. It was in these terms that suicide was so essential a part of the Romeo and Juliet story. There was in the Renaissance, moreover, much respect for the classical notion of suicide as a noble act by which man fulfills his obligations and attains a higher good than life itself, and on the stage suicide was often portrayed in such terms. Only the most insensitive of critics could regard Romeo and Juliet as destined for damnation; their suicide, inherited by Shakespeare as an essential part of the story, must be regarded as a symbolic act of acceptance of inevitable death. Dramatically it is the most effective means by which such acceptance may be portrayed. The results of the act are not damnation, but instead, the "destruction of evil by the ending of the feud. Out of the self-inflicted deaths of Romeo and Juliet come a reconciliation and a rebirth of good, a catharsis that would be well-nigh impossible were it bought with the souls as well as the lives of the young lovers.

Shakespeare might easily have written "defy" instead of "deny," for that word might have conveyed a similar meaning. It need not be taken to indicate a Byronic challenge to Fortune. To defy Fortune is to assert one's independence of it, and that is what Romeo does. … Shakespeare might have written "defy" had he been a lesser artist, but he wrote "deny" because of the deliberate echo and reminder it might furnish of that earlier and equally crucial line, "O, I am fortune's fool" [III, i. 136]. The fool, or child of Fortune, has now thrown off the authority of Fortune. These two lines mark the two poles of Romeo's development from creature of passion to man of reason. In the meaning of the latter line there is a deliberate echo of the earlier one.

It would, of course, be foolish to measure Romeo's conduct in the final act against a consistent classical ideal of stoicism [a philosophy founded by the Greek thinker Zeno in about 300 B.C. which holds that wise men should be free from passion, unmoved by joy or grief, and submissive to natural law]. A true Stoic would not have committed suicide, but Shakespeare's brand of Christian stoicism was rarely consistent philosophically. The simple point Shakespeare wishes to make is that Romeo has grown to maturity, has learned to accept the order of the universe with all it may entail, that he is ready for death, and that he can accept it bravely and calmly as the necessary means toward the greater good of reunion with Juliet. He will, as he puts it:

shake the yoke of inauspicious stars  
From this world-wearied flesh.  
[V, iii. 111-12]

When Paris says to him in the graveyard, "for thou must die," it is not merely to Paris that Romeo replies: "I must indeed; and therefore came I hither" [V, iii. 57-8]. In that simple line is a summation of Romeo's development. He has come willingly to embrace the necessary end of life's journey.

The world of *Romeo and Juliet* is a somber, realistic one in which youth is born into evil and must struggle against it ceaselessly until the conflict is ended by inevitable death. But Shakespeare's tragic vision is not one of resignation or despair; it is one of defiance and hope, of pride in those qualities of man that enable him to survive and achieve victory in such a world. It is this tension between pride in man and terror of the world's evil which Clifford Leech [in his *Shakespeare's Tragedies and Other Studies in Seventeenth-Century Drama*] has called the essence of the tragic emotion; and Shakespeare goes far toward achieving this tension in *Romeo and Juliet*. There is a design for tragedy in this early play, a conception of man's position in the universe to which character and event are designed by the artist to conform. There are, of course, inconsistencies in the design; Shakespeare has not yet been able entirely to escape the limitations imposed upon him by his sources, but we can nevertheless perceive, governing and shaping the matter that Shakespeare took from Arthur Brooke, the idea of tragedy as a portrait of man's journey from youth to maturity, encountering the evil in the world, learning to live with it, and achieving victory over it by death. Like the tragedies of Aeschylus, *Romeo and Juliet* proclaims also that man learns through suffering, but even more strongly than in Greek tragedy, there is affirmation in Shakespeare that the ultimate plan of the universe is good, for out of the suffering of individuals the social order is cleansed of evil. The deep-rooted family feud is finally brought to an end. (pp. 283-86)

Irving Ribner, "Then I Denie You Starres: A Reading of 'Romeo and Juliet'," in *Studies in the English Renaissance Drama*, Josephine W. Bennett, Oscar Cargill, and Vernon Hall, Jr., eds., New York University Press, 1959, pp. 269-86.