**Douglas Cole** (Douglas Cole, in an introduction to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Romeo and Juliet: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Douglas Cole, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970, pp. 1-18.)

[*Cole outlines the major elements of Romeo and Juliet that have typically generated the most commentary in an attempt to explain both the play's significance and its enduring appeal. The critic discusses the tragedy in relation to Shakespeare's other writings; how the playwright adapted the drama from the sources and traditional dramatic and poetic models available to him; the play's language, structure, and themes; and its adherence to conventional tragic dramaturgy, or theatrical representation. In addition, Cole analyzes three principal thematic readings of Romeo and Juliet —(1) a tragedy of character in which the lovers are punished for their reckless passion; (2) a tragedy of destiny in which fate is responsible for Romeo's and Juliet's deaths; and (3) a tragedy of divine providence in which God sacrifices the lovers to reconcile the feuding families. The critic then asserts that the play presents a synthesis of all three issues in its emphasis on the idea that tragic disaster is an inescapable consequence of the precarious balance between good and evil in the world*.]

How does one create an enduring literary myth out of a sentimental romance, a love story already rehearsed in prose and verse in several languages? How does one turn a pair of young lovers into figures of such imaginative stature that they will fire the emotions of audiences for centuries to come and even obscure the competing images of lovers from classical mythology and medieval legend? Shakespeare never had to ask such questions of himself when he began to write *Romeo and Juliet*, but the response of the world audience to his play since that time has made them inevitable. No case has to be made for the continuing vitality of *Romeo and Juliet.* Its stage history (outmatched only by *Hamlet's*) reveals a nearly unbroken chain of performances for more than three and a half centuries. It has inspired music, opera, ballet, literature, musical comedy, and film. Modern criticism, taking the play's impact for granted, attempts to elucidate some of the things that made Shakespeare's achievement possible (his source materials, his era's literary and dramatic conventions, and his own earlier writing, for example); to define the qualities of its structure and language; and to explore its relationships to Shakespeare's later tragedies. The results of this critical effort help us understand some of the answers to our opening questions, but not yet all. (p. 1)

**Transformation of Sources and Conventions**  
It was common dramatic practice in Shakespeare's day to draw upon known history, legend, and story for the plot material of plays. Shakespeare did not have to invent the basic story of *Romeo and Juliet*. Nor did he have to invent a totally new kind of poetic language for handling the theme of love. Such a language lay at hand in contemporary love poetry, with its stock of characteristic metaphors, paradoxes, and conceits derived from Petrarch's famed Italian love poems. Neither was the combination of a lyrically developed love story and dramatic tragedy altogether novel, although it was far more common in the early Elizabethan theater to find love themes treated in comedy. Whatever hints were provided for Shakespeare by all these traditions he was able to refashion into something uniquely superior.

The story of *Romeo and Juliet* was already an old one when Shakespeare decided to dramatize it for the Elizabethan stage. There were at least half a dozen versions circulating earlier in the century in Italy and France, and two of them had been adapted by English translators. Shakespeare apparently relied chiefly on Arthur Brooke's long poetic version, *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*, first published in 1562 and reissued twenty-five years later. (pp. 2-3)

Many modern readers of Shakespeare may be unaware of the immense difference between the ordinary verse of the Elizabethan age and Shakespearean poetry. They are likely to be even more unfamiliar with the usual quality of dramatic speech written for the developing Elizabethan stage. (pp. 3-4)

The lyricism of Shakespeare's play lifts it far above the stumbling verse of other Elizabethan playwrights, and places it closer to the more literary traditions of love poetry, especially to the flourishing cult of the sonnet. The verse in *Romeo and Juliet* borrows heavily from sonnet conventions of metaphor and feeling, but manages also, as critics never tire of pointing out, to move beyond the conventions to something still more impressive. When Romeo and Juliet at their first encounter share the lines of a sonnet, Shakespeare shows us how a poetic convention can take on entirely new life in a dramatic context.

There is new life as well in Shakespeare's approach to the subject of young love itself. When the Elizabethans wrote tragedies of love, they were likely to emphasize the more lustful and obsessive qualities of passion, aspects which Shakespeare also had taken up in his long poems *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594). The fashion in Italian tragedy, imitated both in France and in England, was to stress the mastery of the god Cupid, who was often portrayed as a malevolent, gloating tyrant. Some of this feeling filters into *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, the love tragedy written by Shakespeare's influential contemporary Christopher Marlowe. In *Dido* the heroine is more a victim than a celebrant of love, and the pattern of action stresses frustration and the pains of love denied or abandoned. The predominant strategy of Elizabethan dramatists was to present characters who were "love-crossed" rather than star-crossed. Their figures lack the sense of mutual dedication and individual purpose that inspires Romeo and Juliet. The love of Shakespeare's characters is conveyed with more compassion and innocence than can be found anywhere else in Renaissance drama.

Although Shakespeare's lovers are more idealized than those found either in Brooke's poem or in Elizabethan love tragedies, and although they speak with a language more lyrical than that of their counterparts in these earlier works, they never become ethereal fantasies. One major reason for this (and another distinguishing element in *Romeo and Juliet*) is the way in which passion and sentiment are modulated with both comic gusto and tragic irony. Mercutio and Juliet's Nurse, for example, are original comic developments of characters mentioned in the source story; in the play they not only become vital and amusing in themselves but also help to link the romance of Romeo and Juliet with an earthy sense of reality. On the tragic side, Shakespeare establishes thematic patterns of greater subtlety and paradox than the usual irony of "destructive passion"; his patterns suggest that even the virtues of loyalty, peace-making, and total personal dedication can unwittingly cooperate to bring about disaster.

Perhaps even more important is the way Shakespeare uses both comedy and tragedy to enhance each other in one play. His earlier *Titus Andronicus* had relied all too heavily on the sensationalistic devices of the neo-Senecan fashion in tragedy: wholesale slaughter, severed hands, rape, children's bodies cut up and served as part of their parents' meal. In *Romeo and Juliet*, thankfully, Shakespeare was trying something new. The tragic pattern he employed was imposed on materials, characters and moods appropriate to comedy and fashion: a comic nurse and clown, obstructing parents, duels of wit and parodic banter, the playful humor of hero and heroine. Shakespeare seems characteristically intent on stretching the range of tone usually assumed in early tragedy. He gives us not a comic play that somehow turns out tragically, but a more complex experience that weaves together intense, lyrically celebrated young love, vivacious and often bawdy wit, and the threatening, obstructive forces of ignorance, ill will, and chance—a combination which expresses the human impulse to affirm what is precious and beautiful in life in the very midst of a more pervasive hostility and baseness in the conditions and circumstances of life itself.

When compared with Shakespeare's later tragedies, the play may reveal a certain lack of profundity, a less far-reaching and momentous drive to open up the disturbing depths of human conduct and capacity. For some critics *Romeo and Juliet* is not yet "mature" tragedy; but we must remember that their norm is based on what Shakespeare himself did afterwards, not on what anyone in the Elizabethan theater had done earlier. It is perhaps fairer to say that the kind of tragic experience *Romeo and Juliet* offers us is different rather than immature, an experience less morally complex than others, but no less valid as an image of deeply moving aspects of our own awareness of life's promises and betrayals.

**Poetic and Dramatic Language**  
If *Romeo and Juliet* marks Shakespeare's first original movement toward serious tragedy, it also marks a movement toward a dramatic language of increasing flexibility and expressiveness. The play shows the poet trying to integrate his skills of verse structure, rhyme, metaphor, and ingenious wordplay with dramatic skills of characterization through style of language and gesture, exposition through action as well as declamation, and imagery patterns that function to blind a diversified scenario into a unified thematic order. Shakespeare's work here displays a texture of marked formality, notable in the abundant rhyme, extended conceits, and above all in a wide range of "set pieces"— among them Mercutio's Queen Mab passage, Friar Lawrence's sermons, Juliet's epithalamion [a song or poem written to celebrate a wedding], Paris's elegy, the sonnet shared by the lovers at their first meeting, and the *aubade* [a song of lovers parting at dawn] at their farewell. In patterning so much of the dialogue on these very literary models, Shakespeare was clearly stretching his medium to see what it could do. He was writing this play in the period that included the highly elaborated language of *Love's Labour's Lost*, the extended complaints of *Richard II*, the lavishly decorative erotic poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, and his own contribution to the sonnet-cycle fashion. In *Romeo and Juliet* we find Shakespeare's virtuosity with formal poetic language extended not only by the demands of dramatic contect, but also by an awareness of how easily formality may slip into artificiality. Shakespeare seems to have delighted in trying his hand at many different kinds of verbal play, but always with some tact about crossing the boundaries of what is truly acceptable. More than any other dramatist of the period, he is capable of inserting near-parodies of the conventional themes and devices he is exploiting. By such means he seems to remind his audience, as Juliet reminds Romeo: "Conceit [i.e., true understanding or invention], more rich in matter than in words, / Brags of his substance, not of ornament" "[II, vi. 30-1].

[Samuel Taylor] Coleridge was perhaps right when he claimed that in this play the poet had not yet "entirely blended" with the dramatist, implying that these elements of poetic formality do not always seem to work effectively in dramatic context. Samuel Johnson much earlier had complained that the characters were always left with a conceit [i.e., an elaborate parallel or metaphor] in their misery—"a miserable conceit"; and actors and actresses in every generation have had their problems with the labored lamentations of Juliet and Romeo in Act Three. Critics move from such examples of awkwardness (only awkwardly justified by the Elizabethan taste for that sort of thing), to matters of tired convention or excessively developed imagery, such as we find in Romeo's first speeches on love or Lady Capulet's comparison of Paris to a book. Here there is more room for argument that Shakespeare knew what he was doing in supplying the love-sick pup Romeo with the most familiar catalogue of Petrarchan oxymora [a combination of contradictory terms] ("O brawling love, O loving hate, . . . O heavy lightness, serious vanity, . . . Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health. ..." [I. i. 176, 178, 180]), or giving Lady Capulet such artificially toned sentiments, or providing such a bathetic chorus of grief in the Capulet household when Juliet's "death" is discovered. One can sense in the kind of language used at such points a corresponding emotional or imaginative immaturity in the character, a weakness which will help define later a strength or intensity somewhere else. In a play that works so well with contrasts in theme and mood, contrasts in language have a fit place.

Most critical skepticism disappears in response to the lyrical language of the balcony scene or of the farewell at dawn. Many playgoers know the purple passages from these scenes by heart, but what is often forgotten is the way Shakespeare has rendered his poetry effective by constructing the scene which contains it so that theatrical dimensions (setting, timing, entrances and exits, interplay between characters, etc.) provide the real foundation for the charm and power of the words. There is a "language" in the scenario itself, and in the sequence of actions and reactions within a given scene, which enables the poetic language to convey its maximum meaning and feeling. (pp. 4-8)

**Structure**  
Critical commonplaces regarding the structure of *Romeo and Juliet* tend to emphasize a handful of its characteristics: the swift pace of the action, which Shakespeare compresses into a few days' duration dramatized in two dozen scenes, many of which center on sudden reversals and the need for quick decisions; the emphatic juxtaposition of comic characters and attitudes with foreboding and destructive situations; the heightening of the young lovers' purity of feeling by contrast both with the lustier attitudes of the Nurse and Mercutio and with Romeo's studied infatuation with Rosaline; the more obvious contrasts between love and hate, youth and age, impetuous action and helpless wisdom; the efficiency and impact of the central reversal scene of Mercutio's death; and finally, for critics with allegiance to Aristotelian tragic formulas, the excessive reliance on sheer accident or chance in order to move the events toward a disaster which seems less inevitable than tragedy demands.

Qualities of pace and contrast are best sensed in performance, where it becomes clear how increasingly masterful Shakespeare's theatrical skill is becoming. He is able to convey more by the pace and proportion of action than he had been even in the violent early history plays. "Proportion" is perhaps a vague term, but it does cover the skill by which Shakespeare shapes his presentation of the lovers' destiny. We are never directly aware, for example, that Romeo and Juliet are actually together to share only 330 lines throughout the whole play, about one-ninth of the play's length; but that proportion helps nevertheless to accent the intensity and rarity of feeling embodied in their encounters, as well as to impress upon us the weight and complexity of the outside world's "doings" which obstruct the couple and aid in destroying them. (pp. 10-11)

The comic texture of the play is also kept under a fine control. Roughly one-sixth of the total dialogue can be called comic, and practically all of it is confined to that part of the play before Mercutio's death. It helps to build, even within the more threatening outlines of the family feud, a hearty atmosphere of comradeship, wit, gaiety and high spirits—an atmosphere which seems to hold out a promise for the budding love of Romeo and Juliet, but which turns out to be explosive. Each comic character or event is made to harbor an ironic counterthrust: the gaiety at the ball is marred by a vengeful Tybalt; the witty Mercutio harbors a fatal itch to fight; the sympathetic Nurse betrays her drastic lack of sensitivity when she urges Juliet to forget Romeo and marry Paris. The unifying symbol for these comic people and events, as well as for the lovers themselves and the bustling world about them, can be found in the Friar's osier cage: those flowers, plants, and weeds—some beautiful, many capable of both healing and destroying, all very natural and part of the mortal earth.

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 divers kind  
We sucking on her natural bosom find:  
Many for many virtues excellent  
None but for some, and yet all different.  
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.  
[II. iii. 9-22]

That comedy and tragedy lie down together in this play not only points up the reversal in mood that takes place with the killing of Mercutio and Tybalt, but illustrates again the inner paradox of our mortal nature.

**Theme**  
I take that paradox, as stated by the Friar, to be at the heart of this play, and also a foreshadowing of a theme given further embodiment in Shakespeare's later tragedies. Others have suggested differing central themes for *Romeo and Juliet*, ranging from a literal insistence on the lovers' star-crossed fate, to a Freudian view of their experience as an embodiment of the death-wish; from a neo-orthodox-Elizabethan lesson in the dangers of passion, to a providential triumph of love over hate.

The reasons for such diversity are discoverable in the play, which seems to hold out a number of keys to interpretation. If we look only at the conclusion, with the reconciled parents and the promise of a golden monument, we may be inclined to see the mysterious ways of Providence working toward good. If we listen chiefly to the Friar's moral admonitions, rather than to his reflections on the natural condition cited above, we may agree that haste and lack of wise forethought bring about the disaster. If we catalogue all the tricks played by chance (particularly Friar John's undelivered message and the unhappy timing of arrivals and awakenings in the final scene), we may see it all as the workings of a hostile external Fate. Tragic theorists become disheartened at the lack of a more highly developed moral consciousness in the central figures and the corresponding lack of close cause-and-effect integration between such characterization and the destructive outcome. And students of Elizabethan piety (both familial and religious) are inclined to feel more harshly about Romeo and Juliet themselves than even Friar Lawrence does at his most chiding moments. The interpretive problem is a problem involving proportion and balance: a balanced view of the play must rest on an awareness of the delicate balance of its diverse elements. To emphasize one to the exclusion of the rest will not give us a theme worthy of the play's actual structure or the dramatic experience it yields in performance.

It is undeniable that the strategy of the play generates strong sympathy for the lovers, heightens their superiority in richness and purity of feeling, and awakens our compassion for their plight. It is also undeniable that Romeo in particular is both reckless and desperate at the wrong moments; partly because he is in love, partly because he is young, partly because he is the histrionic Romeo. By the end of the play Shakespeare makes more of a man of him than the miserable boy (of Act III) grovelling in tears on the Friar's floor, but he also gives him a cruel power with that added strength and determination: the slaying of Paris is the dramatic proof. The combination is deliberate: Shakespeare's sources contain neither the heightened sense of the lovers' innocence nor Paris's murder. The play does not prove that Romeo and Juliet should not have yielded to their love for one another, or disobeyed their parents, or been so quick to marry or to kill themselves. It does suggest that the flower of an innocent love, because of the earth in which it was planted, could foster its own destruction. Shakespeare hints at a natural disaster rather than a moral one, but his conclusion urges something beyond disaster: that such a destruction may in turn foster the reconciliation of the elders who do not understand love. The beauty and harmony of the lovers does not die with them. (pp. 11-13)

The envy, ill will, and aggressiveness that characterize the feud do not represent the total threat to the love of the central figures. The feud is always present as a dangerous obstructing condition; it is a reason for keeping things secret which if known would resolve many complications. But it is not of itself a villainous thing that destroys the lovers intentionally. To understand its limitations as an element in the whole balance is to realize that the play cannot be summed up as a conflict between the forces of young love and old hate. Tragic destruction results from a pattern which includes as well the unaccountable element of chance and the more pervading element of unawareness. So many incidents in the play exhibit people who do not know what they are really doing, people who are both agents and victims of an unthinking impetuosity. The spectrum ranges from the vulgar servants of the opening scene through Mercutio's duel, Capulet's marriage-planning, the murder of Paris, to Romeo's suicide and the Friar's fear of being discovered at the tomb. Clearly this kind of unawareness leads to an irony often associated with tragedy (although it is also a standard tool of the comedy writer who builds a complication out of interlocking misunderstandings), but in the context of Shakespeare's play it does more than heighten suspense and trigger an agonized "If only he knew!" audience reaction. It serves to impress upon us a basic condition of human interaction— our unconscious limitations in understanding the motives of others (and of ourselves), our ultimate helplessness in the face of the multiple possibilities of things going awry. Once this quality is fully felt, we cannot be content with condemning either stupidity or "rude will" as the basis of destructive evil. We are led once more to an insight or a perception of the mortal world which is broader than the strictly moral one: tragic destruction, though often the consequence of human decision, is beyond that an irremediable aspect of the natural world and man's limited consciousness. That perception is somewhat muted by Shakespeare's concluding reconciliation, but because it is grounded in the conditions of human interaction in the play, it cannot be an element totally "resolved" by this or any other kind of ending.

**Fate and Coincidence**  
Two final problems related to this quality or insight remain. One is the problem of Fate. The other is the feeling that *Romeo and Juliet* lacks tragic inevitability precisely because so much of the action turns on ignorance that might have been remedied and on sheer mistiming. The prologue, the foreboding dreams and intimations of death, and the futility of the elaborately planned attempts to restore Romeo and Juliet to one another all tend to stress that the destiny of the lovers is fated. Each move that they make toward each other is matched by some counterthrust; and though there is no villain or human agent behind the opposition, some readers have felt that Fate itself takes on the quality of a destructive agent, moving events and characters in cruel combination to produce the disastrous outcome. Romeo may want to defy the stars, but in that very defiance he is unwittingly cooperating in his own doom. The trouble with this interpretation again lies in what it must leave out or ignore. If we are to judge the reconciling conclusion of the play as inappropriate to the major design of the tragedy, as a last-minute excrescence that does not fit well with earlier motifs, then perhaps we may rest content with the vision of inimical Fate. But if we see the ending as purposeful, and as an evocation of the paradoxical good that can spring from a lamented destruction, the simple view of Fate will not satisfy. Nor can we ignore what Shakespeare characteristically stresses in all his tragic drama: the connections between the character of men and the disaster that may befall them. In this case, we have only to recall the care Shakespeare has taken to show us Romeo in an unheroic and desperate hysteria after he has killed Tybalt: a scene frequently embarrassing to actors but nevertheless integral to the play. It shows us the emotional proclivity in Romeo without which the external misfortunes and mischances would not have culminated in his death. If Shakespeare had wanted to put full strength into the Fate motif, he could also have employed such allegorical devices as had appeared in the contemporary play *Soliman and Perseda* [by Thomas Kidd], in which choral figures called Love, Death, and Fortune debate the relative power of their influence on the human lives in the story. The personification of a hostile Fate or Fortune was a fashionable convention in the neo-Senecan tragedy of the Elizabethans; the theme was equally conventional. In *Romeo and Juliet* however, Shakespeare was moving in another direction. His developing vision of a tragic universe was not to be defined by hostile fatality, but by a paradoxical and all too precarious balance of good and evil. (pp. 14-16)

Time is the enemy even more than chance; it presses in upon the lovers in countless ways—the dawn brings the threat of discovery; a bare second enables the envious sword of Tybalt to fell Mercutio; the marriage date foreshortened by a capricious Capulet demands swift counterplans and decisions, which bring, in turn, disaster. The fast-paced world that Shakespeare builds up around his characters allows little possibility for adherence to Friar Lawrence's counsel of "Wisely and slow" [II. ill. 94]. In such a world to stumble tragically is surely no less inevitable than it is for Lear to go mad in the face of human ingratitude. In a vivid performance of the play, things happen so swiftly and suddenly that issues of probability hardly arise. Add the fact that the emotions behind the catastrophe have been made probable, and we readily see why we do not look upon the death of Romeo and Juliet as merely a terrible accident.

It is possible to step back from the immediate emotional grip of *Romeo and Juliet* and discover that we have somehow been taken in, that the swiftly moving world of sudden love and sudden death has been arbitrarily contrived, that the mechanism of the plot and the ingenious conceits of the language display a rather self-conscious artistry. At this second level of response, we may become aware that, for all its virtues, the play does not exhibit the power, range, and deeply probing qualities of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* or *Lear*. Its reflective, philosophical dimensions are confined rather tightly to a few discourses by Friar Lawrence, where they remain detached from the emotional intensity of the chief characters; in *Hamlet* and *Lear* those who question the dignity of man and the nature of the gods are those who also suffer the greatest torments. *Romeo and Juliet* is surely a more honest expression of human tragedy than the grotesque *Titus Andronicus* or the melodramatic *Richard III*, but it has not yet found the most potent articulation for the paradox of good and evil in the natural world. If we feel finally that the play is not *major* tragedy, it is for such reasons rather than for defects in probability. A moving and compassionate expression of intense and vital passions, it burns with a flame more luminous than searing.

To a certain extent, it cannot do otherwise, granted its subject. As a close-up study of a breath-taking young love, it has little time or place for the probing inner conflicts of Shakespeare's more mature and deeply disillusioned characters. Indeed, one of the marks of the lovers' innocence is that they remain untouched by the experience of disillusionment, the experience that sounds the bass note of tragic anxiety from *Julius Caesar* on and echoes throughout Shakespeare's so-called "problem plays" and later romances as well. Romeo and Juliet are all in all to one another; the radiance of their shared love illumines them with glowing beauty, but casts little light on the world around them. Their experience, and ours as an audience, is thus intense but circumscribed. Shakespeare's structure of contrasts and paradoxes sets off that experience in a rich and colorful design, but he does not choose to emphasize in it the more disturbing deeper shadows that he was soon to explore with such comprehension. Here he was content to temper extremities with extreme sweet, and in view now of the world's reaction to his play who is to say he chose wrongly? (pp. 16-18)