One of the reasons for the fame of *Romeo and Juliet* is that it has so completely and clearly isolated the experience of romantic love. It has let such love speak for itself; and not alone in the celebrated wooing scenes, where the hero and heroine express themselves with a piercing directness, but indirectly also, and possibly with still greater power, in the whole play in so far as the whole play is built to be their foil. Their deep interest for us lies in their being alone in a world which does not understand them; and Shakespeare has devoted much attention to that world.

Its inhabitants talk only of love. The play is saturated with the subject. Yet there is always a wide difference between what the protagonists intend by the term and what is intended by others. The beginning dialogue by Sampson and Gregory, servants, is pornographic on the low level of puns about maidenheads, of horse-humor and hired-man wit. Mercutio will be more indecent … on the higher level of a gentleman's cynicism. Mercutio does not believe in love, as perhaps the servants clumsily do; he believes only in sex, and his excellent mind has sharpened the distinction to a very dirty point. He drives hard against the sentiment that has softened his friend and rendered him unfit for the society of young men who really know the world. When Romeo with an effort matches one of his witticisms he is delighted:

Now art thou sociable, now art thou  
Romeo, now art thou  
what thou art, by art as well as by nature.  
[II. iv. 89-91]

He thinks that Romeo has returned to the world of artful wit, by which he means cynical wit; he does not know that Romeo is still "dead" and "fishified" [II. iv. 38], and that he himself wil soon be mortally wounded under the arm of his friend—who, because love has stupefied him, will be capable of speaking the inane lines, "I thought all for the best" [II. i. 10-4]. (pp. 70-1)

The older generation is another matter. Romeo and Juliet … will be sadly misunderstood by them. The Capulets hold stiil another view of love. Their interest is in "good" marriages, in sensible choices. They are match-makers, and believe they know best how their daughter should be put to bed. This also is cynicism, though it be without pornography; at least the young heart of Juliet sees it so. Her father finds her sighs and tears merely ridiculous: "Evermore show'ring?" [III. v. 130]. She is "a wretched puling fool, a whining mammet" [III. v. 183-84], a silly girl who does not know what is good for her. Capulet is Shakespeare's first portrait in a long gallery of fussy, tetchy, stubborn, unteachable old men: the Duke of York in *Richard II*, Polonius [in *Hamlet*], Lafeu [in *All's Well that Ends Well*], Menenius [in *Coriolanus*]. He is tart-tongued, breathy, wordy, pungent, and speaks with a naturalness unknown in Shakespeare's plays before this, a naturalness consisting in a perfect harmony between his phrasing and its rhythm:

How how, how how, chop-logic! What is this?  
"Proud," and "I thank you," and "I thank you not;"  
And yet "not proud." Mistress minion, you,  
Thank me no thankings, nor proud me no prouds,  
But fettle your fine joints 'gainst Thursday next,  
To go with Paris to Saint Peter's Church,  
Or I will drag thee on a hurdle thither.  
[III. v. 49-55]  
(pp. 71-2)

The Nurse, a member of the same generation, and in Juliet's crisis as much her enemy as either parent is, for she too urges the marriage with Paris [III. v. 212-25], adds to practicality a certain prurient interest in love-business, the details of which she mumbles toothlessly, reminiscently, with the indecency of age. Her famous speech concerning Juliet's age [I. ill. 12-57], which still exceeds the speeches of Capulet in the virtue of dramatic naturalness, runs on so long in spite of Lady Capulet's attempts to stop it because she has become fascinated with the memory of her husband's broad jest:

*Nurse*. And since that time it is eleven years;  
For then she could stand high-lone; nay, by the rood,  
She could have run and waddled all about;  
For even the day before, she broke her brow;  
And then my husband—God be with his soul!  
'A was a merry man—took up the child.  
"Yea," quoth he, "dost thou fall upon thy face?  
Thou wilt fall backward when thou hast more wit;  
Wilt thou not, Jule?" and, by my holi-dame,  
The pretty wretch left crying and said, "Ay."  
To see, now, how a jest shall come about!  
I warrant, an I should live a thousand years,  
I never should forget it. "Wilt thou not, Jule?" quoth he;  
And, pretty fool, it stinted and said, "Ay."

*Lady Capulet.* Enough of this; I pray thee, hold thy peace.

*Nurse*. Yes, madam; yet I cannot choose but laugh,  
To think it should leave crying and say, "Ay."  
And yet, I warrant, it had upon it brow  
A bump as big as a young cockerel's stone;  
A perilous knock; and it cried bitterly.  
"Yea," quoth my husband, "fall'st upon thy face?  
Thou wilt fall backward when thou comest to age;  
Wilt thou not, Jule?" It stinted and said, "Ay."

The Nurse's delight in the reminiscence is among other things lickerish, which the delight of Romeo and Juliet in their love never is, any more than it is prudent like the Capulets, or pornographic like Mercutio. Their delight is solemn, their behavior holy, and nothing is more natural than that in their first dialogue [I. v. 93-110] there should be talk of palmers, pilgrims, saints, and prayers.

It is of course another kind of holiness than that which appears in Friar Laurence, who nevertheless takes his own part in the endless conversation which the play weaves about the theme of love. The imagery of his first speech is by no accident erotic:

I must up-fill this osier cage of ours  
With baleful weeds and precious-juiced 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 divers kind  
We sucking on her natural bosom find.  
[II. iii. 7-12]

The Friar is closer to the lovers in sympathy than any other person of the play. Yet this language is as alien to their mood as that of Capulet or the Nurse; or as Romeo's recent agitation over Rosaline is to his ecstasy with Juliet. The lovers are alone. Their condition is unique. Only by the audience is it understood. (pp. 72-4)

Mark Van Doren, "Romeo and Juliet," in his *Shakespeare*, Henry Holt and Company, 1939, pp. 65-75.

**Maurice Charney**  
[*Charney places Romeo and Juliet in the context of love and lust as it is traditionally represented in Shakespeare, ultimately arguing that love in itself does not produce the tragedy in the play*.]

The introduction of inauspicious signs sometimes seems not only inappropriate but also mechanical and artificial. After Mercutio's magnificent Queen Mab oration, Romeo is troubled by unmotivated forebodings. His anxieties precede his meeting with Juliet in the next scene:

my mind misgives  
Some consequence 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. (1. 4. 106-11).

Why does Romeo have these fears—only to help Shakespeare out in his heroic effort to inject a feeling of tragedy into this play? Likewise, Juliet surprises us with her trepidations in the magnificent Orchard Scene:

Although I joy in thee,  
I have no joy of this contract tonight.  
It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden;  
Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be  
Ere one can say it lightens. (2. 2. 116-20)

But love in Shakespeare is traditionally represented as sudden, immediate, and lightning-like. It comes at once and is not the product of mature deliberation. It is hard to know, therefore, what Juliet's fears are based on, unless, like Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, she has already read the play and knows how it will turn out. She has no way of discerning at this point that the comedy of love culminating in marriage will take a bad turn and end in tragedy. Admittedly, there is the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues, but that seems to be dissipating, so it seems another comic plot device to prevent the course of true love from running smooth.

Friar Lawrence also does much to develop the sense of fatality in the love affair. In the scene before Mercutio's death in 3.1, the lovesick Romeo comes to ask the Friar to perform the marriage ceremony. Already Romeo is speaking of "love-devouring death" (2. 6. 7), as if his love for Juliet were naturally associated with death. Friar Lawrence continues in the same vein:

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. (9-15)

"Love moderately" is surely bad advice in the context of all the love affairs in Shakespeare before *Romeo and Juliet*. It is a contradiction in terms. Shakespeare is making such a strenuous effort to pull the play into tragedy that the many portentous statements about the love of Romeo and Juliet seem misconceived. The tragedy of the lovers seems generated by their intense and abrupt passion rather than by the feud between the houses. This is an idea that the play is promoting in many different, misguided ways.

Romeo too is made to fear the absoluteness and suddenness of his love. Shakespeare makes a continuous association of love and death — the Liebestod — in this play despite a comic context of search and fulfillment. Inauspicious astrological signs are inserted into *Romeo and Juliet* like the portents in the early scenes of Julius Caesar. Even before he meets Juliet, Romeo fears that "this night's revels" shall inevitably lead to "some vile forfeit of untimely death" (1. 4. 109-11). There is no real basis for his feelings, except that we onlookers know the play will take a sudden turn toward tragedy. I am arguing that this turn, or peripeteia, is overprepared, as if Shakespeare were worried that the audience would not properly accept the way the play moves into tragedy. Romeo and Juliet love each other deeply and truly, and they want naturally to get married and consummate their passion as soon as possible, like all the other lovers in Shakespeare's comedies. There is nothing wrong with any of this.

What we have to fall back on is the fact that love in itself does not produce the tragedy in Romeo and Juliet. The protagonists are always represented as pure and innocent and devoted to each other. They are clearly victims of the feud between the houses. This explanation is explicitly set forth in the Prologue. In his didactic sonnet, the Chorus begins with the "Two households" in fair Verona and their "ancient grudge" whose causes are never explained. It is "From forth the fatal loins of these two foes" that "A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life." "Star-crossed" means astrologically fated or unlucky; it doesn't imply that there is any thing wrong with the lovers or that they do anything to incur disastrous consequences. According to the Chorus, the death of the lovers is necessary to end the feud between their families. Their "misadventured piteous overthrows / Doth with their death bury their parents' strife," "And the continuance of their parents' rage, / Which, but their children's end, naught could remove." It sounds as if Romeo and Juliet are specifically marked as scapegoats.

This idea is taken up again at the end of the play. Capulet announces that Romeo and Juliet are "Poor sacrifices of our enmity" (5. 3. 304), and the Prince deals with the love death as a sacrifice:

Capulet, Montague,  
See what a scourge is laid upon your hate,  
That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love. (291-93)

So the tragedy by rights belongs to Capulet and Montague rather than to Romeo and Juliet, who are required to die for love because true love is not possible in a world of senseless blood feuds. They are "Poor sacrifices" of the feud, victims and scapegoats, rather than tragic protagonists.

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