*Romeo and Juliet*, above everything a play of love, is also a play of hatred and of the mysterious ways of fortune. Although love in the first part of the play amuses us, in the end we pity the unhappy fate of young lovers, a fate which critics find embarrassingly fortuitous or, in the Aristotelian sense, unnecessary, the accident of chance to which all human life is subject. Despite the compelling poetry of the play and Shakespeare's skill at creating the illusion of tragedy, the play is said to succeed "by a trick." Whereas Aristotle demanded a "glimpse into the nature of things" beyond theatrical sensationalism and required of tragedy "an overwhelming sense of inevitability," Romeo and Juliet die, critics often tell us, only as the result of a series of mistakes and misunderstandings. In this light the lovers' death is pathetic rather than really tragic.

Critics are also embarrassed by Shakespeare's paradoxical treatment of the three great themes of the tragedy. On the one hand it can be demonstrated that the catastrophe develops from faults of character: Romeo's impetuous nature leads him to despair and die. On the other hand the text also gives us reason to believe that the love of Romeo and Juliet comes to a terrible end because of the hatred between the two families. And yet a third view makes fate the main cause of the final disaster: Romeo and Juliet had to die because they were "star-cross'd."

The seeming conflict of these themes and the division among critics has given support to the belief that Shakespeare reveals no consistently moral view of the universe in this tragedy but gives us a slice of life without comment, standing apart from the great guiding ethos which dominates both Tudor philosophy and literary criticism. If the play has any final meaning it is to be found in the passionate rhetoric of love with which Shakespeare expresses his own youthful ardor.

Against these prevailing views... [I] propose that *Romeo and Juliet* is a true mirror of the Elizabethan concept of a moral universe although Shakespeare does not preach morality. Judged by Elizabethan standards, the play is not merely a gorgeous and entertaining melodrama but a carefully wrought tragedy which balances hatred against love and which makes fortune the agent of divine justice without absolving anyone from his responsibility for the tragic conclusion. Unlike his source Shakespeare attempts a solution to the problem of evil by fitting the power of fortune into the scheme of universal order. Although Shakespeare's viewpoint is not Greek, Romeo . . . is an agent of God's justice but remains responsible for his own doom. (pp. 63-64)

One of the most solid features in the unchanging ground of Shakespeare is the belief in a just Providence. Mysterious as the ways of this Providence are, the pattern remains visible. Although the innocent suffer, the guilty are always punished. Not fate but the corrupt will makes men the agents of their own destruction. . . .

There is no blind fate in Shakespearean tragedy nor in the Elizabethan universe. Behind what looked like chance stood God in control of his creation. Fortune was a figure of speech devised by men to explain the inexplicable operations of the Deity, (p. 91). . . .

[A] belief in individual responsibility forms the philosophical background of mature Elizabethan tragedy. The Renaissance God used fortune as the instrument of his vengeance. In Shakespeare the wayward passions of men subject them to the whims of fate. Thus Hamlet, praising Horatio, equates fortune and the will:

blest are those  
Whose blood and judgement are so well commingled.  
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger  
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man  
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him  
In my heart's core. . .  
[*Hamlet*, III, ii. 68-73]

While viewing drama, especially *Romeo and Juliet*, we often respond passionately as the doomed heroes respond, and this is, as critics have always known, one of the secrets of tragic catharsis. But beneath these passions the ground bass of an unshakable system continues to move, adding harmonies which we who have rejected that ethic no longer hear. Tragic tension results from the contest between human passion and will which work with and against fate in the elaborate Elizabethan harmony.

This *condition humaine* [human condition] helps to explain what otherwise are glaring faults in the progress of *Romeo and Juliet.* Shakespeare has promised us at the very beginning that we are to see a pair of star-crossed lovers. Romeo himself first dreads the influence of the stars and then curses them for his misfortune. Both he and Juliet have forebodings of the sorrow to come. Again and again the characters gropingly predict the course of the future. Accident and coincidence add to our feeling that blind fate dominates the action.

But to offset this feeling Shakespeare has provided two commentators to remind us that the terrible things we have seen are all the work of divine justice. When Friar Laurence cries,

A greater power than we can contradict  
Hath thwarted our intents . . .  
[V, ii. 153-54]

it seems most natural to suppose that the holy Friar is invoking God rather than blind fate, for he has denied that fate is the cause of Romeo's wretchedness. Earlier he has warned frantic Romeo that his fortune depended upon his own virtue and moderation, that the man who flies in the face of fortune is to blame for his own misery. "Why rail'st thou," he asks Romeo after Tybalt's death,

Since birth, and heaven, and earth, all three do meet  
In thee at once, which thou at once wouldst lose.  
Fie, fie...  
A pack of blessings light upon thy back;  
Happiness courts thee in her best array;  
But, like a misbehav'd and sullen wench,  
Thou pout'st upon thy fortune and thy love.  
Take heed, take heed, for such die miserable.  
[III, iii. 119-22, 141-45]

And when he discovers Juliet in the tomb, we learn that he has begged her to come forth

And bear this work of heaven with patience.  
[V, iii. 261]

According to the Friar Romeo's actions must determine his ultimate felicity or doom, and yet at the end he finds Romeo's death to be the "work of heaven," It would seem that. . . the Friar does not dissociate human actions and the power of fortune which represents God's will.

The second commentator Shakespeare gives us to point up the meaning of the tragedy is Prince Es-calus, who at the ending of the play and at the point of greatest emphasis, sums up the significance of all that has happened:

See, what a scourge is laid upon your hate,  
That Heaven finds means to kill your joys with love.  
[V, iii. 292-93]

After hearing these words and contemplating the evenhanded justice which has leveled parent with parent, child with child, and friend with friend, would not the audience sensitive to providential fortune and its use in tragedy understand without any tedious explication that fortune has operated here to punish sin and that this avenging fortune is the work of heaven? Such an audience would not have stuck at applying pitiful Rosamond's words to the lovers [in Samuel Daniel's *The Complaint of Rosamond*],

fate is not prevented, though foreknown,  
For that must hap, decreed by heavenly powers  
Who work our fall yet make the fault still ours.

In *Romeo and Juliet* then fortune may be considered not the prime mover but the agent of a higher power. If fortune is not the independent cause of the catastrophe, then we must look behind fortune for the actions which set it in motion. Friar Laurence warns Romeo that his own folly in love will doom him. Prince Escalus, speaking as chorus, attributes the tragedy to hate. Both are right, for it is the collision of these passions which dooms the lovers.

Of these two forces love overshadows the other dramatically, since it is the passion of the protagonists and since Shakespeare has lavished his most moving poetry upon the love scenes. But the fact remains that this is not a play centered on one passion but a play of carefully opposed passions. The prologue informs us that we are to see a drama of love and hate. Hatred is the first passion to threaten tragedy in the comic opening of the play; hatred brings about the actual climax of the action, Mercutio's death; and hatred is the theme which Shakespeare introduces with love at the end of the play to explain the workings of fate.

The theme of hatred involves more than the opposition of two private families; because of the street brawls, because of the murderous intrigues of the two opposed parties, it involves the whole state. Romeo and Juliet, whose love would unite the two houses, are forced apart by the quarrel which they seek to avoid. Thus the love story in the play, as in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Troilus and Cressida*, is more than a tale of love, and the problems of the play are not only ethical but in the broadest sense political. (pp. 92-5)

Thus, although our main interest is in Shakespeare's handling of love, we must also inquire into Shakespeare's use of the complementary theme of hatred. *Romeo and Juliet* is built about two passions traditionally opposed, and the interweaving of these two themes, like the ambiguous balance between comedy and tragedy, adds to the peculiar irony which pervades the play. (p. 96)

The full power of hatred comes out ... in Escalus's speech which sums up the meaning of the action. He calls the miserable fathers from the crowd:

Capulet! Montague!  
See, what a scourge is laid upon your hate,  
That Heaven finds means to kill your joys with love.  
And I for winking at your discords too  
Have lost a brace of kinsmen. All are punish'd.  
[V, iii. 291-95]

This speech does not make sense unless we take into account the close interaction of fate, hatred, and love in the play.

Escalus's gloomy judgments give us a true criticism of the whole tragedy. The phrase "your joys" must refer to the lovers, the hope of each of the two warring houses. Their death through love is the punishment of heaven, working through fate, upon the families who have carried on the feud. (p. 100)

When we look back over the course of hatred, we see the truth of Escalus's sentence, "All are pun-ish'd." Fate has worked to produce an evenhanded justice. The force of Mercutio's dying imprecation on the houses appears at the end of the tragedy in the mysterious death of Lady Montague on the night of her son's suicide. Her death, Shakespeare's addition to his source as are the deaths of Paris and Mercutio, evens the score between the families. Partisan pays for partisan and kinsman for kinsman. Just as love holds families and nations and indeed the whole universe together, so hatred breaks up families, destroys commonwealths, and, represented by Satan, constantly works to unframe God's whole handiwork. It is precise and ironical justice that quenches the one passion by means of its opposite. *Romeo and Juliet*, no less than Shakespeare's mature tragedies, celebrates the great vision of order by which the English Renaissance still lives. (p. 101)

The play is uniquely constructed in that the same passions which make us tearful or indignant before the action ends, do amuse us with little interruption for almost half the acting time. Even the events leading up to Mercutio's death promise comedy rather than tragedy, and it must have startled the first audience to see laughter so quickly turn to mourning. Yet the play is an exceptionally powerful tragedy, even if it sometimes embarrasses critics. Where the first half delights us with love comedy, the last three short acts explore the tragic potentialities of young love. Fortune and hatred threaten to turn the lovers' bliss to ashes, but the immediate cause of their unhappy deaths is Romeo's headlong fury and blind despair. Thus in both the beginning of the play and at the end Shakespeare's view of love remains sound philosophically and dramatically. (p. 102)

Throughout *Romeo and Juliet* Romeo is precipitate in love. Juliet, who loves as faithfully, is much less subject to the gusts of passion which blind Romeo. Romeo never examines the consequence of his actions, but Juliet fears that their love may be "too rash, too unadvis'd, too sudden" [II, ii. 118]. Romeo never shares Juliet's insight. After they have pledged love at Juliet's window, his only concern is that the love he feels seems too delightful to be true. It is Juliet not Romeo who thinks practically of arranging for marriage and who remembers to ask what time she is to send her messenger in the morning.

On Romeo's inability to control either his passionate love or his passionate grief, his death and Juliet's depend. The boundless love which Romeo felt at the sight of Juliet turns as suddenly to despair, just as any well-versed Renaissance philosopher might have predicted, for the man in the grip of one passion was easily swayed by another. (pp. 105-06)

Romeo therefore is a tragic hero like Othello in that he is responsible for his own chain of passionate actions. When we first see him he is already stricken with love. This first love is comic, but nevertheless it is a real attack of the sickness of love, as his father makes clear when he complains that Romeo's humor will turn "Black and portentous" [I, i. 141] unless checked.

Since the man stricken with passion could not readily defend himself against new onslaughts of passion, Romeo's sudden passionate about-face when he sees Juliet would have seemed realistic to an Elizabethan audience. Romeo's transports for Juliet differ from his first melancholy because she returns his affection. For a time he is cured and conducts himself so reasonably that even Mercutio comments on the change in his temper.

But with Mercutio's death Romeo casts aside all reason and begins a chain of passionate action which leads to death. Rejecting the reasonable conduct with which he had first answered his enemy, he attacks and kills Tybalt. It would certainly have spoiled the play for Romeo to have waited for the law to punish Tybalt, but the fact remains that this reasonable action would have turned tragedy into comedy. In this choice between reasonable and passionate action lies one great difference between the genres. Forgiveness produces the happy ending of comedy; revenge produces the catastrophe of tragedy.

Romeo's next passionate mistake is to fall into frantic despair after the Prince sentences him to banishment. When Romeo cries out against his lot, Friar Laurence, the consistent voice of moderation and wisdom, warns him that he is truly unfortunate only in giving way to uncontrolled grief.

The next step in Romeo's march to destruction is his sudden and complete despair when he learns that Juliet is dead. The direct result of Romeo's frenzied desire to kill himself is his killing of Paris, an incident which Shakespeare adds, like the death of Lady Montague and the death of Mercutio, to his source. Thus Brooke's Romeus dies with less on his conscience than does Shakespeare's hero. In Brooke Romeus kills Tybalt only to save his own life, not to revenge a friend, and at the end of the play dies guiltless of any additional blood save his own. In our play, however, Shakespeare is careful to make Romeo guilty of sinful action under the influence of passion, while at the same time making us sympathize with Romeo's agonies of despair. In his encounter with Paris Romeo announces both his own mad desperation and the fact that in bringing the chain of passionate folly to its close, he puts one more sin upon his head.

Romeo's last passion-blinded act is to kill himself just before Juliet awakes, and her suicide may be thought of as the direct result of his. Although Shakespeare does not preach, the Elizabethan audience would have realized that in his fury Romeo has committed the ultimate sin. (pp. 114-16)

[The] tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* is a true tragedy, preserving the ambiguous feelings of pity and terror which produce catharsis. Romeo remains a free agent even though he scarce knows what he does. Those who allowed passion to carry reason headlong were guilty of the very fault that Elizabethan ethics were designed to prevent. It is exactly because love could unseat the reason that few men who loved excessively could look forward to a virtuous life and a happy death. (p. 116)

Does this mean that. . . the spectators in [Shakespeare's] day, or that Shakespeare himself, looked upon the play as an edifying lesson in how not to conduct oneself in love? I hardly think so. The pattern of the action, given shape by Friar Laurence's warnings, Mercutio's satiric ebullience, and the Prince's scattered judgments, revolves around two of the most attractive young lovers in all literature. But the patterns of moral responsibility are necessary to give the action its perspective, and it is these patterns of the destructive as well as the creative force of love and the dependence of fate upon the passionate will which most contemporary criticism neglects or denies. We, who have moved so far from Shakespeare's world, need to be reminded of these things. They would have touched his audience far more deeply than they touch us today. (p. 117)

Franklin M. Dickey, in his *Not Wisely but Too Well: Shakespeare's Love Tragedies*, The Huntington Library, 1957.