Romeo and Juliet are in a precarious situation, like two children playing with fire near a barrel of gunpowder. They should be careful, prudent, mindful of the future, but they are all too prone to be the very opposite. They are too strongly infected with the hectic spirit of Verona, they have the hot blood and the hot temper of their race. They are like two flames which merge into one.

Romeo is lyrical, ecstatic, a man who approves of his emotions and revels in them, goes in search of them, exaggerates them almost. He is what we should call one of Love's lovers. He allows his feelings to direct his actions, as he proves, when despite his many forebodings about a premature death, he sets off for the feast at Capulet's house:

But he, that hath the steerage of my course,
Direct my sail! On, lusty gentlemen.
[I, iv. 112-13]

At the beginning of the play we hear that he is in love with Rosaline, but this love affair is not really to be taken seriously, it is … something he has invented, or possibly imagined. At any rate we find it difficult to believe in it. He speaks in outworn antitheses and forced, artificial similes. The truest word he speaks about it is the very passage which shows how airy and artificial it is.

Love is a smoke raised with the fume of sighs. . . .
[I, i. 190]

Romeo is the born lover who has not yet found the real object of his affections, and is wandering about, conscious or unconscious of the fact, looking for it.

In Juliet's eyes Romeo is not only the lover but the liberator. She is only fourteen years old, but she has been waiting for him even before she meets him. She has yearned to get away from a house which is no home, merely an uncongenial place of residence, sometimes almost a prison. She has no one to love, there is no human being with whom she has any intimate contact, neither her nurse, whose broad remarks and stories make no impression on her, nor her subdued mother, nor her hot-tempered father, jovial, fond of festive occasions and brutal to boot, a domestic tyrant, who is convinced that it is the child's duty to love and the parent's duty to command; a father who threatens her with chastisement and expulsion, if she refuses to obey his orders on the instant.

Juliet has preserved all the tenderness of her feelings, and has learnt to conceal those feelings when occasion demands. She is beautiful and wise, courageous and quick to act—admirably equipped, in fact, to play the role which circumstances force her to adopt.

Romeo and Juliet are made for one another, dearer to one another than life itself, and instinctively know this the very moment they meet. They are carried away by the force of fate, they burn and glow with a new intensity, every moment they are tensed and proved to the uttermost of their beings, and in the course of a few summer days they blossom and develop from callow youth to the maturity of man and woman, to an all-conquering and all-besetting passion.

Their very words become music, poetry, fancy. As scholars are quick to remind us, the first words they exchange are in the form of a sonnet, and Juliet's soliloquy on the eve of her bridal night is a nuptial hymn, while their conversation the next morning is a hymn to dawn, an aubade. Their life, pulsing hotly, beats to a hectic rhythm. Practically every word Juliet utters in the balcony scene marks a step forward, an action, a decision. She is brisk, and anxious at the dizzy whirl of events:

Dost thou love me? I know thou wilt say "Ay"
In truth, fair Montague, I am too fond,
And therefore thou mayst think my haviour light:
But trust me, gentleman, I'll prove more true
Than those that have more cunning to be strange. . . .
Well, do not swear. Although I joy in thee,
I have no joy of this contract to-night:
It is too rash, too unadvis'd, too sudden;
Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be
Ere one can say "It lightens." Sweet, goodnight!
This bud of love, by summer's ripening breath,
May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet.
Good-night, good-night!
[II, ii. 90, 98-101, 116-23]

She is impatient when she is waiting for the nurse to return with an answer from Romeo, and for that reason a highly comic effect is achieved by the irritatingly dilatory manner of the nurse, and the stream of irrelevancies with which she crams her reply. She is more impatient still before the bridal night, as she waits for Romeo:

Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,
Towards Phoebus' lodging, such a waggoner
As Phaeton would whip you to the west,
And bring in cloudy night immediately.
Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night!
That rude day's eyes may wink, and Romeo
Leap to these arms, untalk'd of and unseen!
Lovers can see to do their amorous rites
By their own beauties; or, if love be blind,
It best agrees with night. Come, civil night,
Thou sober-suited matron, all in black,
And learn me how to lose a winning match,
Play'd for a pair of stainless maidenhoods:
Hood my unman'd blood, bating in my cheeks,
With thy black mantle; till strange love, grown bold,
Think true love acted simple modesty.
Come, night! come, Romeo! come, thou day in night!
For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night,
Whiter than new snow on a raven's back.
Come, gentle night; come, loving, black-brow'd night,
Give me my Romeo!
[II, ii. 1-21]

Friar Laurence, who is most likely the poet's mouthpiece, tries in vain to brake the headlong speed:

Romeo:
O! let us hence; I stand on sudden haste.

Friar Laurence: Wisely and slow; they stumble that run fast.
[II, iii. 93-4]

Friar Laurence:
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.
[II, vi. 9-14]

Romeo too tries to check his ardour. As we have seen, he refuses to fight with Tybalt, and when Mercutio is wounded he is at first calm, and hopes the wound is slight:

Courage, man; the hurt cannot be much.
[III, i. 95]

But when Benvolio returns, and tells him of Mercutio's death, and Tybalt returns in triumph, there is an end to Romeo's patience, and his wrath floods his being, like a river that has broken its banks. It is worth noticing how he approves his own wrath:

Benvolio:
Here comes the furious Tybalt back again.

Romeo:
Alive! in triumph! and Mercutio slain!
Away to heaven, respective lenity,
And fire-ey'd fury be my conduct now!
Now, Tybalt, take the villain back again
That late thou gav'st me; for Mercutio's soul
Is but a little way above our heads,
Staying for thine to keep him company:
Either thou, or I, or both, must go with him.
[III, i. 121-29]

Once again the mood of the moment runs away with him. When he hears, after Tybalt's death, that Juliet calls his name and Tybalt's in her despair at what has occurred, he exclaims to Friar Laurence:

O! tell me, friar, tell me,
In what vile part of this anatomy
Doth my name lodge? tell me, that I may sack
The hateful mansion.
[III, iii. 105-08]

And once again he draws his sword; but this time his impetuosity provokes Friar Laurence's wrath in the shape of a sharp rebuke.

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:
Unseemly woman in a seeming man;
Or ill-beseeming beast in seeming both!
Thou hast amaz'd me. ...
[II, iii. 108-14]

There is a break of a day and a half between Act III and Act V, but in the course of those forty odd hours Romeo has aged many years. Reverie has gone and given place to grim determination. There is a crude vigour in his words to the apothecary who sells him the poison, and even more so in the last scene by the vault in the graveyard, when he sends the servant away:

. . . therefore hence, be gone:
But, if thou, jealous, dost return to pry
In what I further shall intend to do,
By heaven, I will tear thee joint by joint,
And strew this hungry churchyard with thy limbs.
The time and my intents are savage-wild,
More fierce and more inexorable far
Than empty tigers or the roaring sea.
[V, iii. 32-9]

And again when he opens the tomb, and bids Paris retire:

I must (die); and therefore came I hither.
Good gentle youth, tempt not a desperate man;
Fly hence and leave me: think upon these gone;
Let them affright thee. I beseech thee, youth.
Put not another sin upon my head
By urging me to fury: O! be gone. . . .
[V, iii. 58-63]

Romeo and Juliet are in a hurry even when it comes to dying. There is no shadow of doubt in their souls that they would rather die than live apart. But had Romeo been in less hurry to die, he would have found a living Juliet.

We may be sure that Shakespeare loved Romeo and Juliet and their love as much as we do, but it is just as certain that he wished to warn young people in his very discreet way not to follow their example. (pp. 51-6)

Lorentz Eckhoff, "Passion," in his *Shakespeare: Spokesman of the Third Estate*, translated by R. I. Christophersen, Akademisk Verlag, 1954, pp. 48-86.