Shakespeare's tragic masterpiece of Courtly Love was written in 1595, when the vogue of courtly sonneteering was at its height. In considering "the fearful passage of their death-mark'd love," critics like E. E. Stoll have been at considerable pains to show that the love of Romeo and Juliet was the normal product of youthful innocence, that "not because there is anything wrong with them do the youth and maiden perish but only because 'love is strong as death,' and 'fate unfriendly' [see Sources for Further Study]. Granville-Barker has written with greater insight into the specific characteristics [in his *Prefaces to Shakespeare*] of the youth and maiden which have made their love "strong as death," but he, too, misses the fuller implications of this love. At the opposite extreme is Franklin Dickey who argues, from the vantage point of the Renaissance moralists, that Romeo and Juliet are afflicted with a love disease the evil consequence of which is death: "fortune has operated here to punish sin and … this avenging fortune is the work of heaven" [see excerpt in section on Tragic Design]. While Dickey performs a service in stripping the play of its romanticism and showing that the quality of its love leads inevitably to death, he is untrue to the tone of the play. *Romeo and Juliet* is not a tract against Courtly Love, but a supreme expression of its spiritual *mystique*. Of this Paul N. Siegel is clearly aware for, in relating the play to the conventions of a courtly "Religion of Love," he has indicated the literary tradition through which this extraordinary work must be approached and so come closest to an understanding of the precise nature of this love.

The love of Romeo and Juliet, while ever in fatal interaction with the feuding world of Verona, yet exists on a plane of experience totally divorced from its normal expectations. The capsular quality of this love, which can run its complete course without betraying its secret existence, is, in fact, the subject of much of the play's dramatic irony, Romeo's confidants patronizing his love for Rosaline while his true love for Juliet is flowering and Juliet's father bustling about her marriage while still believing that it is an honor that she dreams not of. While this counterpointing of the brawling, bawdy, and festive and practical world with the lovers' poetic night world is meaningful, the vitality of the naturalistic presentation tends to obscure the poetic symbolism. The quasi-comic treatment of much of the play puts readers on their guard against taking the lovers' utterances with too much seriousness, and the lovers' occasional playfulness seems to confirm the impression of youthful impetuousness, singing bird-like of its joy.

But if Shakespeare has endowed romance convention with an unusual naturalism, he, no less than the romancers, is vitally concerned with "the allegory of love." Though his lovers react with greater psychological realism to their dilemmas than do the cardboard lovers of romance, they follow as un-questioningly an implicit code of love and, in their poetic utterances, point to its symbolic implications. Although the psychological and symbolic levels are often interpenetrating, there are moments when the symbolism becomes completely divorced from naturalistic presentation. When, for instance, Romeo refers to Juliet as his "conceal'd lady" [III. ill. 98], the rhetoric of human love has been completely displaced by one appropriate to a mystical religion of love.

The tragedy which is to so transcend the ordinary conventions of romance begins with a caricature of them. Romeo's love for Rosaline has been "rais'd with the fume of sighs" [I. i. 190] and "nourish'd with lovers' tears" [I. i. 192]. He has carefully conformed to all the prescribed rules of Courtly Love, spending the night with tears and making "himself an artificial night" [I. i. 140] with the coming of day. But this stylized behavior is not so different from the convention which allows Romeo and Juliet to fall irrevocably in love at first sight and for Juliet quite naturally to say: "Go ask his name.—If he be married, / My grave is like to be my wedding bed" [I. v. 134-35]. These two loves are not different, then, in kind but in the quality of the poetry in which they are expressed, the earlier a patchwork of conventional Petrarchanisms, the later a profoundly mystical exploration.

Through this conventional behavior, however, suggestions of character do emerge. Romeo is a youth in search of an infinitely thrilling love, a love for which he is prepared to face suffering and even death. Though the indulgence of his feelings for Rosaline causes him to feel slightly ridiculous— "Dost thou not laugh?" [I. i. 183]— he cherishes "the devout religion of mine eye" [I. ii. 88] and longs to put it to the test. Hitherto sinking passively "under love's heavy burthen" [I. iv. 22], he is suddenly jarred from a purely imaginative to an active role by the suggestion that he compare his beloved's beauty with that of others at the Capulet feast.

Although he had only wished to view his love and prove the constancy of his heart, a sudden premonition of the danger of thus venturing into the enemy's camp elicits from him his first profoundly personal utterance:

. . . 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, clos'd in my breast,  
By some vile forfeit of untimely death.  
But he that hath the steerage of my course  
Direct my sail! On, lusty gentlemen!  
[I. iv. 106-13]

In this speech the character of Romeo emerges from the role of conventional courtly lover to reveal a deeper quality of doom. In terms of the action Romeo rightly fears that in so venturing to see Rosaline he may be forfeiting his life to fate, for it is from Tybalt's recognition of him at the feast that the fatal consequences of his exile are to issue. But however eager he was to nourish his "lover's tears," the prospect of possible death for the love of Rosaline is another thing. Suddenly faced with this prospect, he recognizes that such death would be a "vile forfeit." If he nonetheless continues his fatal voyage, it is no longer the desired sight of Rosaline but the challenge of fate which spurs him on. If fate has marked him out, he will not be "fearful" but hold his "despised life" in as much contempt.

Although it was earlier acknowledged that his immediate love for Juliet was a stock romance convention, this crucial speech, which just precedes his first sight of Juliet, may suggest a motivation for the fatal urgency with which he approaches his love. As he is risking his life in the name of a love which has not inspired him to the point where he can consider his life's loss as more than a "vile forfeit," his need for a truly inspirational love becomes urgent. Having accepted fate's challenge, he is now concerned to transmute this "vile forfeit" into a glorious surrender.

And this inspiration comes to him at the radiant sight of Juliet:

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!  
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night  
Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear—  
Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!  
[I. v. 44-7]

Where Rosaline's beauty had left him in the utter darkness of an unhappy human love, Juliet's beauty, because it seems to him too precious for the usages of life, can truly illuminate the night. From this first encounter, however, Romeo conceives of his lady not as an ordinary mortal but as a symbol of divine beauty, which, in the "touching," can make him "blessed" [I. v. 51]. His earlier premonition of death has been displaced by this intimation of heavenly blessing; but the close association of these two in "this night's revels" is significant.

From what has just been shown, we can see the way in which Shakespeare invests a stock convention of romance, 'that of love at first sight, with suggestions of both human motivation and symbolic implication. And what he has done for Romeo he does in lesser measure for Juliet: if Romeo meets Juliet at a fateful moment in his life, the same is true for her. She had just been informed by her mother that she must "think of marriage now" [I. iii. 69]. And, although she had said that "it is an honour that I dream not of " [I. iii. 66], she is forced for the first time to consider marriage as a real and imminent possibility. In doing so, her maiden heart gains a new susceptibility which will cause her to look at men differently this night: "I'll look to like" [I. iii. 97].

As Romeo had come to the feast to behold Rosaline, feeling that in venturing thus into the enemy's camp he was forfeiting his life to fate, so does Juliet come to inspect the man to whom her parents would likewise have her dedicate her fate. Both, however, instead of looking where they had intended, seem compelled to make a last desperate comparison before their fate is irrevocably sealed.

Under a similarly fatal urgency, Romeo finds in Juliet's radiant beauty the inspiration he had been seeking; and Juliet suddenly finds herself inspired by Romeo's passionate prayers. This love at first sight, then, is not simply a submission to fate but a choosing of their fate. When Romeo learns that "my life is my foe's debt" [I. v. 118] and Juliet the same, they can therefore accept their fate with a commitment that redeems it from being a "vile forfeit."

Their love has been born in the heart of obstruction, and if their knowledge of this crucial fact was "muffled still," the passionate need by which they found each other out could "without eyes see pathways to his will" [I. i. 171-72]. For this central obstruction to their love, rather than deterring their passion serves only to intensify it: "Temp'ring extremities with extreme sweet" [II. Pro., 14]. Romeo had chanced such an extremity in coming to the feast and Juliet in choosing another than the one her parents had appointed before they were aware of the true extremity they had embraced, and, when they do become aware of the obstruction to their love, they accept its necessity without question. Though Romeo and Juliet marry, their marriage so approximates the adulterous union of night that it even borrows from the troubadours the traditional verse form of the aubade or dawn song, which celebrates the adulterous lovers' hour of parting. "More light and light—more dark and dark our woes" [III. v. 36] is not the language of marriage but of lovers who "steal love's sweet bait from fearful hooks." [II. Pro., 8]. The marriage of Romeo and Juliet... in no way changes the obstructed situation which makes the necessity of their partings "such sweet sorrow" [II. ii. 184].

If their meetings can only take place in the night, night has for the lovers a special significance. They do not covet night for itself but because it is only then that the power of love can be truly illuminating. As has been seen, it is Juliet's radiance which first strikes Romeo. Again, as he stands beneath the balcony, she appears to irradiate the night:

But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?  
It is the East, and Juliet is the sun! … her eyes in heaven  
Would through the airy region stream so bright  
That birds would sing and think it were not night. …  
O, speak again, bright angel! for thou art  
As glorious to this night, being o'er my head,  
As is a winged messenger of heaven …  
[II. ii. 2-3, 20-2, 26-8]

Juliet converts the terrors of night to glory. It is for this reason that Romeo can say:

I have night's cloak to hide me from their sight;  
And but thou love me, let them find me here.  
My life were better ended by their hate  
Than death prorogued, wanting of thy love.  
[II. ii. 75-8]

In a night containing Juliet's love, death need not be dreaded and is far preferable to his otherwise uninspired life. He eagerly ventures into the night since it is only in "the dark night" that Juliet's "true-love passion" [II. ii, 104-06] can be revealed. But if Juliet's love robs death of its terror, it nonetheless is in intimate association with death. As Juliet informs Romeo, in a statement loaded with symbolic as well as practical meaning, the place where she abides is "death, considering who thou art" [II. ii. 64]. Though Romeo faces a practical danger in approaching thus close to her feuding kinsmen, it is also true on the symbolic level that the approach to a Juliet who is heavenly "light" and "bright angel"—that is, to a love object beyond the mortal condition—must ultimately be made by way of death.

Realizing that the way to his "bright angel" is barred by his name, Romeo exclaims:

Call me but love, and I'll be new baptiz'd;  
Henceforth I never will be Romeo. . . .  
Had I it written, I would tear the world.  
[II. ii. 50-1, 57]

Though Romeo feels that the receipt of Juliet's love would be a rebirth for him, the rebirth in the heavenly love which Juliet represents requires not simply the tearing of his name but of the mortal self which that name identifies. Yet however much it may be symbolic of death, he embraces the night in which the infinitude of Juliet's love has been disclosed as a "blessed, blessed night!" [II. ii. 139].

As Juliet symbolizes a divine love to Romeo, even answering him with a celestial accent, so he assumes a similar role to her. In Juliet's invocation to night, the full implications of this worship of night are revealed:

Come night; come, Romeo; come, thou day in night;  
For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night  
Whiter than new snow upon a raven's back.  
Come, gentle night; come, loving, black-brow'd night;  
Give me my Romeo; and when he shall die,  
Take him and cut him out in little stars,  
And he will make the face of heaven so fine  
That all the world will be in love with night  
And pay no worship to the garish sun.  
[III. ii. 17-25]

Romeo is a creature of night, and, as such, Juliet coaxes night to loan her Romeo until such time as he shall die and be returned to night, arguing that when such a true lover should be returned by death he would impart a special glory to the love of night. Though night and death are here seen to be interrelated and Romeo in their power, it is yet his special virtue to irradiate their darkness. As Juliet had emblazoned the night for Romeo, so he to her is "day in night." While disdaining "the garish sun," that which exhibits all the concreteness and limitations of terrestrial life, it is not the annihilating darkness of night in itself which they worship but the special radiance of the limitless which shines for them in the heart of darkness. If night is symbolic of death, death itself is but the other face of the Infinite, (pp. 44-50)

While Romeo has shown no hesitation in pursuing his love, he soon finds it not such a simple matter to tear his name. However fully his spirit may assent to the aims of his love, his human situation does cause some resistance to it.

This is fully brought out in the duel between Romeo and Tybalt. Romeo first counters Tybalt's overtures in the conviction that he is "new baptiz'd" by love. With Mercutio's death on his hands, however, Romeo realizes that he is a Montague still and that, in wishing to deny this fact, he had proved false to himself: "O sweet Juliet / Thy beauty hath made me effeminate / And in my temper soft'ned valour's steel!" [III. i. 113-15]. Juliet had called her place "death, considering who thou art." and now Romeo once again has a premonition that, being Romeo, his pursuit of love into the enemy's camp will prove fatal: "This day's black fate on moe days doth depend; / This but begins the woe others must end" [III. i. 119-20]. And again he accepts his fate and challenges Tybalt. Having killed him and understood that the consequences will be disastrous, however, his old fear arises once more and causes him to cry out: "O. I am fortune's fool!" [III. i. 136]. As before he had feared, when accepting fate's challenge, that his "untimely death" would be a "vile forfeit," so, now that fate lowers once again, the prospect of his death seems inglorious. The Prince will immediately ask: "Where are the vile beginners of this fray?" [III. i. 141]. And this is Romeo's fear, that his death will not be a glorious martryrdom for love but the vile execution of a street brawler. Even so, he would prefer vile execution to banishment: "Ha, banishment? Be merciful, say 'death'; / For exile hath more terror in his look, / Much more than death" [III. ill. 12-14].

In his discussion of the implications of banishment, the essential quality of his love is again revealed:

"Tis torture, and not mercy. Heaven is here.  
Where Juliet lives. . . . More validity,  
More honourable state, more courtship lives  
In carrion flies than Romeo. They may seize  
On the white wonder of dear Juliet's hand  
And steal immortal blessing from her lips …  
|III. iii. 29-30, 33-7]

Although viewed from one aspect, the place where Juliet lives is death, from another it is "Heaven." the source of purity and "immortal blessing." In the "courtship" of this "immortal blessing" Romeo sees the only basis for "validity" and "honourable state." "Death, though ne'er so mean" [III. iii. 45], would be preferable to the continuance of a meaningless life, exiled from even the possibility of "immortal blessing," this indeed a fit symbol of hell: "'banished'? / O friar, the damned use that word in hell; / Howling attends it:" [III. iii. 46-8]. (pp. 53-4)

Exiled from his love, he sees no alternative but to "fall upon the ground, as I do now. / Taking the measure of an unmade grave" [III. iii. 69-70]. Juliet, likewise, does not distinguish between his exile and his death. Thinking he is dead, she says: "Vile earth, to earth resign; end motion here, / And thou and Romeo press one heavy bier!" [III. ii. 59-60]. Learning he is exiled, she nonetheless exclaims: "I'll to my wedding bed; / And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead!" [III. ii. 136-37]. Rejecting her life as "vile earth," she immediately leaps to the thought of lying with Romeo in death. Like Romeo, she is "wedded to calamity" [III. iii. 3], and in her decision to fulfill her wedding not with Romeo but with death, the meaning of this wedding becomes clear. It becomes yet clearer after the wedding's earthly consummation. Romeo's alternatives, "I must be gone and live, or stay and die" [III. v. 11] exist not only for this dawn but for as long as their love shall last. A premonition of this causes Juliet to see even the departing Romeo "as one dead in the bottom of a tomb" [III. v. 56]. (pp. 54-5)

Upon learning of Juliet's supposed death, Romeo resolves with conventional promptitude upon his own. But it is in his treatment of Romeo's confrontation with death that Shakespeare most fully illuminates the accepted conventions of Courtly Love. Though Romeo is dying in order to be united with Juliet, it is with a Juliet who has at last discarded all earthly vestiges to become pure symbol. And now the supreme symbolic function of Juliet becomes clear; she is the means which permits Romeo to confront his fate as a man with joy. If he has made "a dateless bargain to engrossing death" [V. iii. 115], this steadfast commitment to something beyond all mortal contingency raises him above the normal human condition. Juliet had earlier said of him:

He was not born to shame.  
Upon his brow shame is asham'd to sit;  
For 'tis a throne where honour may be crown'd  
Sole monarch of the universal earth.  
[III. ii. 91-4]

As in his dream love made him an "emperor" [V. i. 9], so does the honor of his love make him the universal monarch, raise him to godhead. It is through love of a Juliet symbolically raised to divine status that he redeems his own divine birthright from the "shame" of mortality's yoke.

But the paradox of this desire for the Infinite is that it can only be fully embraced in death. … Death for him is "love-devouring," "engrossing"; it is a final fact but a finality irradiated by joy. It is the infinite freedom experienced in the ecstatic instant of self-annihilation. But to this note of ecstasy, Romeo now adds a deeper note of defiance: "Is it e'en so? Then I defy you, stars!. … Well, Juliet, I will lie with thee to-night" [V. i. 24,34]. Romeo defies the stars and all mortal contingency by accepting the worst they have to offer, thereby transmuting it into a spiritual triumph.

The love-death as a defiance of fate becomes the dominant note as he approaches the tomb:

Thou detestable maw, thou womb of death,  
Gorg'd with the dearest morsel of the earth,  
Thus I enforce thy rotten jaws to open,  
And in despite I'll cram thee with more food.  
[V. iii. 45-81]

Romeo here reveals what is probably his truest attitude toward death. Whereas before he had interpreted every symbolic identification of his love with death as a sign of its infinite glory, betraying no anxiety toward the actual fact of death, he now reveals a deep revulsion toward death. Far from glorious, death here is profoundly felt to be "detestable" and "rotten," and this not in reference to a death vilely brought about through insufficient inspiration or irrelevant accident but chosen by himself under the greatest of inspirations.

Why then, we may well ask, has he been so fatally hasty in choosing his present death? Paradoxical as it may seem, the source of his headlong rush toward death appears to lie not in a love of death but a horror of death so extreme that it has poisoned his life. Unable to accept the anxieties of a contingent mortal existence, he has advanced upon hateful death, daring it to do its worst. Rather than appear fearful of death and give death the victory, he triumphs over death by bringing it upon himself. Not in love of death, but, as he says "in despite I'll cram thee with more food." The ecstasy of self-annihilation at its profoundest level, then, is not due to a feeling of surrender to death but to the triumph of the unconquerable spirit over death, achieving the Infinite in its assertion of ultimate freedom.

It is in this spirit that he views not only his own approaching death but the death of Juliet:

I'll bury thee in a triumphant grave.  
A grave? O, no, a lanthorn, slaught'red youth,  
For here lies Juliet, and her beauty makes  
This vault a feasting presence full of light.  
[V. iii. 83-6]

Juliet's irradiation of the night has been but a prelude to her radiance in death. When Romeo had earlier said that "her eyes in heaven / Would through the airy region stream so bright / That birds would sing and think it were not night," he did not think that such irradiation made the night less real but that it converted its terrors to glory. So is it now with death. To Romeo, Juliet has rot outlived death but she has overwhelmed its horror in radiance. Romeo's exhilaration at the radiance of his love in death produces a "lightning" [V. iii. 90] of his antagonistic mood. In Juliet's triumph over mortality, Romeo sees his own, her excessive beauty in death proving an irresistible goad to his own triumphant conquest of death. (pp. 57-60)

Juliet's death speech has not the poetic grandeur of Romeo's but, as she was ever "light a foot" [II. vi. 16], so she has that "lighting before death" [V. iii. 90] of which Romeo spoke. Seeing Romeo dead, all previous fears are overcome and she moves to death with cheerful alacrity:

O churl! drunk all, and left no friendly drop  
To help me after? I will kiss thy lips.  
Haply some poison yet doth hang on them  
To make me die with a restorative. . . .  
Yea, noise? Then I'll be brief. O happy dagger!  
This is thy sheath; there rest, and let me die.  
[V. iii. 163-70]

Meeting death with a kiss, she dies "with a restorative," the joyous restoration of her initial freedom from constraint and contingency.

The play ends on this final note of the redemptive quality of a death so amorously embraced. Romeo and Juliet had both embraced death as the redemption of their ultimate freedom from mortality's "yoke"; in so doing, their deaths prove to be redemptive as well for the living. In love with the infinite peace they could find only in death, they had spurned the world of strife that gave them being. Now, in the radiant light of their pure sacrifice, the petty futility of that strife is seen. Their deaths not only restore the peace of Verona but confer upon them the special glory of being forever upheld as the city's most shining example of admired virtue. The city immortalizes the "Poor sacrifices of our enmity" [V. iii. 304] who, almost as in a religious ritual, have vicariously atoned for the multiple sins of the populace. The example of their heroic transcendence of the compromises of life and the terrors of death illuminates the more humble path of the ordinary citizen as he attempts to justify, by a more consecrated life, the martyrdom of the gloriously "faithful" [V. iii. 302]. Thus does Shakespeare conclude his great tragedy of a love that has throughout been vehicle and symbol of the "immortal blessing" conferred in the kiss of death. Though the character and reactions of the lovers have been explored in all their earthly reality, they … have embarked on a spiritual journey which finds its promised haven only in a death transfigured by their religious devotion to the dictates of Courtly Love. (pp. 61-2)

Leonora Leet Brodwin, "The Classic Pattern of Courtly Love Tragedy," in her *Elizabethan Love Tragedy: 1587-1625*, New York University Press, 1971, pp. 39-64.