The tragic conception of *Romeo and Juliet* is simply stated for us in the opening sonnet-prologue. By thus announcing his theme and describing the central action, Shakespeare prepares us for the method he will follow throughout the play. We are to watch a sequence of events as they move towards the catastrophe in the full knowledge that they are tragic, that the tragic culmination is somehow inevitable. The tragic effect is to be one of anticipation and its realization. The Greek tragedians … could count on their audiences' familiarity with the story of the play. Shakespeare uses his opening prologue in *Romeo and Juliet* to establish the same condition.

The action concerns not simply two lovers but two families. An ancient feud breaks forth anew, involving in its course two lovers whose destiny it is to be sacrificed to the healing of their families' strife, "which, but their children's end, naught could remove" [Prologue, 11]. The pathos is that the lovers' sacrifice is inescapable; their love is "death-mark'd"; they are "star-cross'd" [Prologue, 9, 6], fated to die in the fifth act. But the tragic outcome is not quite unrelieved. There is to be a kind of reconciliation at the end, though we are not to expect a "happy" ending. Thus, carefully are we prepared to understand and anticipate the ensuing action.

This method of foreshadowing the outcome is carried through the play, in the premonitions and misgivings of the two lovers. "I dreamt a dream tonight" [I, iv. 50], says Romeo, as he goes with Benvolio and Mercutio towards the Capulet party. Mercutio at once takes him up, rallies him, makes his melancholy remark the occasion of his elaborate fancy of Queen Mab. Yet as Benvolio tries to hurry them on: "Supper is done, and we shall come too late!" Romeo reflects,

I fear, too early; for 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. 105-13]

As we are later to realize, Romeo's foreboding is all too well justified. Ere another day passes, Romeo will have loved another maiden than the lady Rosaline who now has all his thoughts; he will have married Juliet, anticipating only happiness; but Mercutio will be slain by Tybalt, Tybalt slain by Romeo, Romeo banished from Verona; and the lives of Romeo and Juliet will be eventually sacrificed. (pp. 19-20)

All of these echoes and foreshadowings emphasize and reemphasize a single theme, a single conception: the seemingly inscrutable necessity of the whole action, a necessity imposed by some power greater than men. (p. 22)

The play culminates with the reconciliation of the rival houses, as the prologue states. Old Capulet and Montague, confronted by the terrible results of their hatred in the deaths of their children, are at length brought to recognize their responsibility. The Prince sums it up:

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. 292-95]

The parents are truly penitent, and from this time forth, we are to understand, their hatred was turned to love.

The importance of this ending in Shakespeare's design maybe seen by contrasting the culmination of the story in his principal source, Arthur Brooke's poem called *Romeus and Juliet.* In Brooke's version, the various instruments of the outcome—the apothecary who sold Romeo the poison, the Nurse, the Friar—are punished or pardoned, but neither the parents nor the enmity of the two houses is even mentioned in censure. Shakespeare's revision of Brooke's ending and his different emphasis are eloquent of his different conception of the point of the tale.

From another point of view, we may test the importance Shakespeare must have attached to the idea the play is designed to express by observing the very arbitrariness with which he manipulates not merely the plot but the characterizations as well, in the interest of working out his total design. The arbitrary insistence upon ironic coincidence in the successive stages of the action is evident. But equally arbitrary is the lack of coherent motivation in Friar Laurence's crucial role. Granted that Friar Laurence is timid and unworldly, and proud of his herbalist's resources, besides; he is still an odd kind of spiritual adviser, without confidence in his authority with the two families, and, we must surely add, without elementary common sense. In real life, any man of sense in Friar Laurence's position would have reflected that the proposed marriage of Juliet with Paris was impossible. Juliet was already married to Romeo. And he would have used this circumstance to force a reconciliation upon the two families—a motive which he professed in marrying the young people in the first place. It is evident that he could count upon the Prince's support in thus seeking to reconcile the feud, and Romeo's pardon, and his own, would easily follow upon the achieving of this worthy end.

This sort of speculation is obviously not relevant to the play as we have it; for such a solution would have given comedy, and Shakespeare was here intent upon tragedy. We must allow the author such arbitrary means; the tragic idea, and the tragic effect, are more important than any mere question of psychological verisimilitude. In observing the arbitrariness of the contrivance, however, we are able to gauge the more accurately the author's central concern. It is with the idea of the play, and the artificial means are an index of the length he is prepared to go in expressing it. Shakespeare neither blames Friar Laurence for his romantic folly, nor allows the common sense solution of the lovers' difficulties to occur to him or to them; and we must not consider that any such point is worth making in our criticism of the play except in so far as our consideration of it may help us the better to understand what the play is about.

If the cumulatively parallel episodes of *Romeo and Juliet* may be called the warp of the play's structural design, the woof is a series of contrasts. It is a drama of youth pitted against age. … Correspondingly, youth stands for love, and age for continuing hate. Most fundamental of all is the contrast, which is not fully revealed until the end, of accident and design.

Arthur Brooke's *Romeus and Juliet* is a translated version of a familiar folk-tale rather clumsily worked up as a popular romance in Pierre Boaistuau's *Histories tragiques*; in Brooke's version, as in Boaistuau's, the ironic succession of reversals is attributed casually to "Fortune"—the customary resource of the romancer intent only upon the turns of his plot. Shakespeare more ambitiously undertook to comprehend the relations of chance and destiny in his tragic design.

Carefully, then, the responsibility of the lovers for their catastrophe, in Shakespeare's play, is minimized, as it is not in Brooke's version. The fact of the feud is emphasized at the outset, and the involvement of Romeo and Juliet is not only innocent but against their will. Even in the catastrophe itself, their self-destruction is hardly more than their assent to compelling circumstance. Romeo, it is true, buys poison to unite himself with Juliet in the grave; but before he reaches the tomb, Paris intervenes to seal with his death the one chance of Romeo's pausing in his resolve. [Harley] Granville Barker oddly remarks that Paris's death "is wanton and serves little purpose." Actually, it is calculated to enhance our sense of the pressure of circumstance upon Romeo. He was distraught before he met Paris at the tomb of Juliet, but not utterly desperate, perhaps. Now, with the blood of Paris upon his hands (again contrary to his will and his anguished protest), he has no remaining ground of hope, no reason to delay his purpose. The death of Paris at Romeo's hands is Shakespeare's own addition to the story and hence an especially significant clue to his conception. It is another irony that prepares us for the most poignant irony of all, as Romeo, in his rapt intentness upon joining Juliet in the grave, fails to interpret aright the signs of returning animation in the sleeping girl. … Juliet, as she plunges the knife in her breast, thinks only of joining her lover. Shakespeare, of course, is not excusing their self-destruction; but it is no part of his design to blame them. Their deaths are a *donnée* [known fact] of the story; the point of it lies elsewhere than in their responsibility.

The blame lies with the families, with the elders. But what of the role of chance, of the fate which so evidently has crossed the love of Romeo and Juliet from beginning to end? They fell in love by accident. Romeo went to the Capulet party expecting to indulge his unrequited passion for Rosaline; Juliet came for the express purpose of seeing and learning to love the County Paris. Amid their later difficulties, if Friar John had been able to deliver Friar Laurence's letter; if Friar Laurence had thought to use Balthazar as his messenger, as he first proposed to do [III, iii. 169-71], or if Balthazar too had been delayed; if Friar Laurence, even had been a little quicker in getting to Juliet's tomb—if anyone of these possibilities had occurred, the outcome might have been very different. We are meant to reflect upon this chain of seeming accidents, for they are prominently displayed.

Here, then, in the play as we have it, is the design—an arbitrary one, to be sure—of "a greater power than we can contradict" [V, iii. 153], that finds means to humble the rival houses "with love." It is a stern conception of Providence, to the working of whose purposes human beings are blind, which fulfils the moral law that the hatred of the elders shall be visited upon the children—"poor sacrifices of our enmity" [V, iii. 304], as Capulet describes them—yet whose power turns hatred in the end to love. The design of the tragedy has been a Christian moral, implicit but still sufficiently manifest to the thoughtful. Herein lies the rationale of the play's structure. The three entrances of the Prince mark the three stages of the action intended to show a chain of seeming accidents issuing in a moral design adumbrated in the sonnet-prologue, implicit from the beginning. The final entrance of the Prince marks the logical climax of a tightly built narrative scheme. This concluding stage of the action reveals, in recapitulation, the significance of the whole design, a design in which the catastrophic deaths of the lovers contribute but a part; the punishment of the elders, and still more their reconciliation, complete the pattern.

But if the logical climax of the play's conception lies in this denouement, the emotional climax comes before, with the deaths of Romeo and Juliet. In this, the world's favourite love story, Shakespeare has endowed his young lovers with all the riches of his earlier lyrical style, with the music of his sonnets which echoes through the play; and he has given them a grace and a purity of motive, in keeping with his larger design, that ensures our complete sympathy from beginning to end. As we follow their story, we cannot help taking sides with them against the elders—against the blind selfishness and perversity of their parents, against the stupid animality, however amusing, of the Nurse, against the absurd ineptitude of Friar Laurence; and as we see them hasten unwittingly to their destruction, we can only pity their youth, their innocence, and their ill luck. They themselves have no awareness of a tragic misstep, of a price justly exacted for human pride or folly, and neither have we: their story is full of pathos, but is has in itself little or nothing of tragic grandeur.

The tragic irony of the story, as Shakespeare tells it, lies in the blindness of the elders to the consequences of their hatred until it is too late, in the reversal brought about by the power greater than they. Yet despite the dramatist's efforts to direct our attention to this larger significance of the action—through the prologue and the structural foreshadowing of his whole scheme; through the chain of unlucky coincidences and arbitrary motives; through the reiteration of the theme of fortune and ill chance and fate—our feelings remain linked with the story of the lovers throughout the play; and audiences and actors alike notoriously feel that with the deaths of Romeo and Juliet the interest of the play is at an end, that the subsequent explanations are prolix and anticlimactic and may well be abridged. This feeling is manifestly contrary to what the dramatist aimed at, but he himself is chiefly responsible for our feeling, in having made his young lovers the centre of our regard.

Thus the play misses its full unity of effect because our sympathies are exhausted before the tragic design is complete. The story of a young and idealistic love thwarted is not enough to make a great tragedy; but Shakespeare, trying to place it within a grander conception, has not been able to achieve a larger unity.