With so much emphasis on Fate [in *Romeo and Juliet*] there is nothing surprising in the fact that Shakespeare makes frequent use of the time-old symbol of the stars in his imagery. Nor, in such a story of romantic love, is it remarkable to find the star-image employed in a second conventional way—as a metaphor for feminine beauty (especially for the eyes of the Lady) and for the attraction of lovers. What is, however, of interest is the way in which Shakespeare subtly fuses these two sorts of star-image; and perhaps the most striking example of this interpenetration is to be observed in some of the lines spoken by Romeo as he watches Juliet at her balcony:

Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven,  
Having some business, do entreat her eyes  
To twinkle in their spheres till they return.  
What if her eyes were there, they in her head?  
The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars  
As daylight doth a lamp; her eyes in heaven  
Would through the airy regions stream so bright  
That birds would sing and think it were not night.  
[II. ii. 15-22]

No doubt this passage could be dismissed as yet another typical conceit [an elaborately fanciful idea or metaphor] of the time. But the scene in which the lines occur is singularly free from the extravagant conceits and artificialities of Petrarchan love-poetry, which Shakespeare appropriately reserves for the early Romeo, the youth in love with love; and if we submit our imagination to the full effect of the scene, this sustained star-image transcends the mere conceit to assume a new meaning. Juliet is now Romeo's star, his fate; and, as his star, she has the magical power of transforming night into day, of changing his wretchedness into radiant joy and the bitter hatred of their families into love.

There is a similar, though slighter overtone earlier in the play, when old Capulet says to Paris:

At my poor house look to behold this night  
Earth-treading stars that make dark heaven bright.  
[I. ii. 24-5]

Here, too, it is of course possible to skip the image of 'earth-treading stars' as a familiar cliche for beautiful women; but, taking it in conjunction with the phrase 'dark heaven', we may perhaps catch in it a faint announcement of one of the fundamental themes of the play—of the hardness and misery of human destiny, sweetened, if but for a brief moment, with beauty and love.

In the star-imagery of Juliet's speech when she is waiting vainly, after the killing of Tybalt, for Romeo to come to her—

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. 21-5]

we certainly have, so far as Juliet herself is concerned, a playful, fanciful conceit, for in her passion and fulfilment she cannot really think of her lover as dead. Yet—once more merging into the symbol of the star as fate—how intense this apparent conceit is, with its irony and prophecy. Little as Juliet knows it, heaven and its crossing stars are in reality soon to lay claim to Romeo; and their way will be just that cruel way of violence that she hints, and Romeo will be nothing but a symbol of the lover, a bright, remote star.

Side by side with these delicate combinations of the star-image we should note, as another effect of the Fate motif on the imagery of the play, the triple 'pilot' image, which, emerging at three key-points, illuminates and focuses the development of Romeo.

The first instance of this image is to be found at [I. iv. 112-13]. Though there is something that warns Romeo that it is perilous to accompany Mercutio and Benvolio to the Capulet banquet, he decides at last to follow them:

But He, that hath the steerage of my course,  
Direct my sail! On, lusty gentlemen.

Here, without experience or thought as yet, and certainly without any religious conviction, Romeo vaguely believes himself to be under the guidance of some exterior force; but he submits to his destiny without resistance, even confidently. Later, when he is assured of Juliet's love and is growing to a rapid maturity, he is bolder and more self-willed, active rather than passive. So, when it occurs for the second time, the pilot-image changes:

I am no pilot; yet, wert thou as far  
As that vast shore wash'd with the farthest sea,  
I would adventure for such merchandise.  
[II. ii. 82-4]

Once more there is the lack of complete self-possession: he will dare anything, but still with a modest, hesitant doubt of his own powers to shape a course entirely to his own determination—'I am no pilot.' And indeed, in the first rapture of Juliet's avowed love, why should he think of rocks and insidious currents? But, transformed by harsh experience, Romeo continues to grow, and when the pilot-image recurs for the last time, just before his death, the pilot is at last himself: the determining force that challenges and defies his stars is something within:

Come, bitter conduct, come, unsavoury guide!  
Thou desperate pilot now at once run on  
[V. iii. 116-18]

This image is the exact antithesis of the first version, as Romeo is the antithesis of his old self.

Another salient characteristic of *Romeo and Juliet*, is the simple, single, and all-pervading nature of its conflict. Its basic theme is that of love arising out of family feud, challenging it, momentarily triumphing over it, and ultimately destroyed by it. From beginning to end the play reflects the eternal struggle between Eros (Love and Life) and the forces of Death.

This being so, it is not surprising that the play abounds in images of strife, contrast, contradiction, and paradox. Most of these arise directly and inevitably from the story and its situations, while. . . much of the tedious antithesis and paradox of Romeo's speech in the first Act springs inevitably from Shakespeare's representation of him as a typical lover of contemporary, mainly Petrarchan, love-poetry. But beside these straightforward conflict-images there is another group in which Shakespeare, often subconsciously no doubt, uses the poetry of the play to reinforce and illuminate its themes and motifs.

The most impressive concentration of these strife and contradiction images occurs in Friar Lawrence's speech shortly before the marriage ceremony, which emphasizes, in a resonant Chorus manner, some of the essential implications of the play. To begin with, there is the detached and generalizing, though no less impressive, restatement of the eternal life-death struggle, which is represented as something absolute:

The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb;  
What is her burying grave, that is her womb.  
[II. iii. 9-10]

Nor, possibly, is this statement entirely general, for 'womb' suggests love, procreation, perhaps Romeo and Juliet, while 'tomb', once we come to know the play, is a key-word with a charged, peculiar significance: it is the 'detestable maw', the 'rotten jaws' [V. iii. 47], that is soon to swallow Romeo and Juliet, and it is to be noticed that in the last scene 'tomb' is once more associated with 'womb':

Thou detestable maw, thou womb of death. . . .  
[V. iii. 145]

Then, both deepening and extending this theme, follows the Friar's meditation on the contradictory properties of nature's fruits and products, leading, through an inevitable transition, to the contraries and contradictions of human life—the good that may change into evil and the vice that may change into virtue, and the intermingled stuff of man's nature:

Two such opposed kings encamp them still  
In man as well as herbs, grace and rude will;  
And where the worser is predominant  
Full soon the canker death eats up that plant.

While the words 'canker death' are still ominously echoing in jtsur ears, Romeo enters.

There are several other passages where the incidental imagery serves to illuminate the contradiction or paradox of the situation from which it arises. For instance, the bold conceit struck out by Romeo at the opening of the Balcony scene—

What light through yonder window breaks?  
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun!—  
[II. ii. 1-2]

concentrates the essential meaning of the whole scene. In truth a miracle has taken place: the warm, life-giving sun of love has broken unexpectedly, through the dark night of family hatred and strife. But, next to the Friar's soliloquy, the most striking example of imagery that crystallizes the spirit of conflict and contradiction in the play is the recurrent association of bridal-bed and grave, Death and the lover:

I'll to my wedding-bed;  
And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead!  
[III. ii. 136-37]

I would the fool were married to her grave!  
[III. v. 140]

O son, the night before thy wedding-day  
Hath Death lain with thy wife: see, there she lies,

Flower as she was, deflowered by him.  
Death is my son-in-law,  
Death is my heir;  
My daughter he hath wedded.  
[IV. v. 35-9]

Shall I believe  
That unsubstantial Death is amorous,  
And that the lean abhorred monster keeps  
Thee here in dark to be his paramour.  
[V. iii. 102-05]

The tone and the immediate purpose of these passages of course vary considerably; but at the core of them all is the powerful, paradoxical image of the play's basic motif—the passionate, interlocking wrestle of love and death. The 'lean abhorred monster' is the ultimate lover; the final wedding-bed is the grave.

Lastly in this poetic elaboration of the play's fundamental motif we may notice the highly evocative use that Shakespeare makes of light and darkness, though this is as much a matter of setting and stage-properties as of imagery. To suggest the first dramatic movement, of love arising out of and challenging family feud, he creates the illusion of light irradiating and finally shattering darkness. First, faintly and remotely anticipating the Capulet feast and its aftermath, we have old Capulet's

At my poor house look to behold this night  
Earth-treading stars that make dark heaven light.  
[I. ii. 24-5]

A little later we see Romeo as the torch-bearer and hear old Capulet raising his cries (the more impressive because they are widely separated) for 'More lights' [I. v. 27] and 'More torches' [I. v. 125]. But the effect of such torches as these is slight compared with the light-drenched imagery, the contrasts of brightness and darkness, in Romeo's first entranced vision of Juliet:

O, she doth teach the torches to shine bright!  
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night  
Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear …  
So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows.  
[I. v. 44-8]

This brilliant radiance of imagery completely floods the following scene, so that the darkness of night is utterly negated. In this scene, apart from the incidental images of the moon and the lightning, there are the sustained images of Romeo's magnificent opening speeches. First Juliet is the dazzling sun of dawn—then two brilliant stars— then his 'bright angel' [II. ii. 26],

As glorious to this night, being o'er my head,  
As is a winged messenger of heaven  
Unto the white-upturned wondering eyes  
Of mortals.  
[II. ii. 27-30]

As he leaves, assured of her love, day begins to break, and the image of it is memorably fixed for us by the vivid opening lines of Friar Lawrence's soliloquy:

The grey-eyed morn smiles on the frowning night,  
Chequering the eastern clouds with streaks of light;  
And flecked darkness like a drunkard reels  
From forth day's path and Titan's fiery wheels.  
[II. iii. 1-41]

The central image of this passage, of dark-dispersing sunlight, is repeated a little later by Juliet:

Love's heralds should be thoughts.  
Which ten times faster glide than the sun's beams  
Driving back shadows over louring hills.  
[II. v. 4-6]

The second movement of the play consists of a violent recrudescence of the Capulet-Montague feud, leading to bloodshed, in which the lovers are whirled helplessly apart: 'black fate' suddenly overshadows the bright day of love and sunshine. This development, too, is partly suggested by the imagery, through the invocation of night and darkness, especially in Juliet's soliloquy in the orchard. Here, because of its echoes and lyrical fervour, her speech reminds us of Romeo's rhapsody at the opening of the Balcony scene; but where Romeo's words had been drenched with images of light, Juliet's are, in contrast, sombre and portentous with images of darkness:

such a waggoner  
As Phaethaon would whip you to the west,  
And bring in cloudy night immediately.  
Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night. …  
Come, civil night,  
Thou sober-suited matron, all in black. …  
Hood my unmann'd blood, bating in my cheeks,  
With thy black mantle. …  
Come, gentle night, come, loving, black-browed night.  
[III. ii. 2-5, 10-11, 14-15, 20]

The wonderful aubade [a song of lovers parting at dawn] of Act III, Scene v, also turns on the lovers' desperate longing for the continuance of the night and darkness, and though in both instances the imagery derives to some extent from the situation since Juliet wants the night to come because it will with the help of Friar Lawrence's drug, 'Or bid me go into a new-made grave / And hide me with a dead man in his shroud' [IV. i. 84-5]. An ugly image for any youngster to dream up and utter, isn't it? I had to take a chance on that grotesqueness because I was setting up my big dress-rehearsal scene for the actual deaths of both youngsters in the Capulets' tomb."

"Which is that, the dress rehearsal?"

"When Juliet is found by her parents, and thought to be dead, I produce a kind of ritual mourning sequence—from father to fiance to Mom to nurse and round again—which I don't suppose you in your laconic times could be expected to appreciate. It probably even sounds humorous to you, but the thing to look out for is that image of Death returning as Juliet's partner in sex: my grotesque linking of what should be life-producing and exalting with its opposite, in mortuary decay. The foolish old father starts things up (and if you still believe that puns have to be entertaining and amusing, listen in), in such a way that not even the gentility could miss it.

O son, the night before thy wedding day  
Hath Death lain with thy wife. There she lies,  
Flower as she was, deflowered by him.  
Death is my son-in-law, Death is my heir;  
My daughter he hath wedded."  
[IV. v. 35-9]

"Now I see the significance of the speech that old Capulet made just before that. It's sexual again, isn't it? 'Death lies on her like an untimely frost / Upon the sweetest flower of all the field' [IV. v. 28-9]. Poor Juliet. So this was the rehearsal for the actual death scene between our lovers, you say?"

"That's so, but don't leave the fake-death quite so fast, good friend. If you listen closely, you'll hear the culminating oxymoron in my whole play, coming from the unlikely source of the old gaffer's mouth":

All things that we ordained festival  
Turn from their office to black funeral—  
Our instruments to melancholy bells,  
Our wedding cheer to a sad burial feast. . .  
Our bridal flowers serve for a buried corpse;  
And all things change them to the contrary.  
[IV. v. 84-7, 89-90]

There you have it: *and all things change them to the contrary*. Can you think of a more succinct description of my play? The flames of sex turn to the ashes of death. My oxymorons would have made my old grammar school instructor in rhetoric proud of me. But I've gone beyond my oxymoronic device to a kind of macabre reality in these two young people's lives, notice. I've given them destinies in which the very seeds of their physical attraction to each other (and observe that Juliet hasn't even seen Romeo's face clearly until they meet to marry in Lawrence's cell: just his 'gracious self,' in becoming hose) are all along ripening to their blighted, inevitable climax together in that tomb. The big death grows inexorably from out of the little death that we spoke of when I first joined you at this pleasant table. And by now you certainly ought to recognize that not all of my puns are for laughter among the penny-admissions."

"All right, so when Romeo is about to buy the poison and says 'Well, Juliet, I will lie with thee tonight' [V. i. 34], he, too, like her—but unlike her mother and evidently many in your audience—has come to understand the inextricable blending of sex and death in their story."

"Yes, precisely. And you can point out to your classes that there really couldn't be a more appropriate ending to my love-death drama than Juliet's reaching there to kiss the poison she prays remains on Romeo's just-stilled lips. 'Haply some poison yet doth hang on them' she hopes [V. ill. 165], and Death can now take them both—my famous youthful lovers—into his eternal embrace. I've made a special sort of tragedy out of the very materials of comedy, don't you see? They die, and then they die."

"Just think of it! Those kids of yours met at the Sunday dinner-dance and were dead in each other's arms by Thursday midnight. Four brief days in which they hardly had time to be wedded and bedded, much less get to know each other— except in the Bible's sense. Not so much 'love in terms of purity and innocence' as sentimental oldsters would like to think [in the Pelican Shakespeare edition of *Romeo and Juliet*], was there, Will? For that matter, both the compactness and the raciness of the action put me in mind a few years back of the limerick, a verse form that we speakers of English invented after your day but which you would've found delightful. Since the first half of your play, up to the sudden death of Mercutio, is like one super limerick, an unending series of bawdy jokes using sexual slang and double entendre, I've encouraged students to write limericks on what's going on, according to their perceptions, in *Romeo and Juliet*. I find that I get some pretty honest and pretty good ones."

"I'll need an exemplum, since I don't know the form of this limerick as you call it."

"It's hard to remember a limerick verbatim when you've been drinking (unlike everyday dirty jokes, which are almost all content and no form), but I think I can give you the idea with one or two here. Let's see:

There once were a couple of teens  
Who aspired to commingle their genes  
But, in trying to mate,  
Were the victims of fate  
And succumbed in the saddest of scenes.

Some of my students really pick up on the punning side of your poetry, Will, which I figured would please you. They miss being as nimble-witted as Mercutio, of course, but that also means that they truly miss him as a character once he's gone from the piay—miss his ribald intelligence, which they've been learning how to listen for.

At the Friar's the kids tie the knot.  
And it puts Juliet on the spot:  
Will the feuders unite.  
Or continue to fight—  
And is Romeo coming, or not?

Because Tybalt, her cousin, was dead  
And her Romeo now banished.  
Juliet could have cried  
That her lover had died.  
But she kept, after losing, her head.

Well, we've been enjoying ourselves, as you can see. And the students turn out to have been right all along about Juliet and her teenage boyfriend, whom she helps to become a man, as they say. overnight. 'Stand, and you be a man. / For Juliet's sake, for her sake, rise and stand!" [III. iii. 88-9], as the nurse so happily puts it. Now, there's a woman! Why, when . . .

"Oh, you have to be on your way: no time for another round? That's too bad; I've enjoyed your company. Well, thanks, and I'll be, uh, hearing you around." (pp. 70-3)

C. Webster Wheelock, "'Not Life, but Love in Death': Oxymoron at the Thematic Heart of 'Romeo and Juliet'," in *English Journal*. Vol. 74, No. 2. February, 1985, pp. 70-3.