

still in his style. The two fatal figures in the play are its two liveliest comics, Mercutio and the Nurse. Mercutio's aggressivity has prepared the destruction of love, though there is no negative impulse in Mercutio, who dies by the tragic irony that Romeo's intervention in the duel with Tybalt is prompted by love for Juliet, a relationship of which Mercutio is totally unaware. Mercutio is victimized by what is most central to the play, and yet he dies without knowing what *Romeo and Juliet* is all about: the tragedy of authentic romantic love. For Mercutio, that is nonsense: love is an open arse and a poperin pear. To die as love's martyr, as it were, when you do not believe in the religion of love, and do not even know what you are dying for, is a grotesque irony that foreshadows the dreadful ironies that will destroy Juliet and Romeo alike as the play concludes.

Juliet's Nurse, despite her popularity, is altogether a much darker figure. Like Mercutio, she is inwardly cold, even toward Juliet, whom she has raised. Her language captivates us, as does Mercutio's, but Shakespeare gives both of them hidden natures much at variance with their exuberant personalities. Mercutio's incessant bawdiness is the mask for what may be a repressed homoeroticism, and like his violence may indicate a flight from the acute sensibility at work in the Queen Mab speech until it too transmutes into obscenity. The Nurse is even more complex; her apparent vitalism and her propulsive flood of language beguile us in her first full speech:

Even or odd, of all days in the year,
Come Lammas Eve at night shall she be fourteen.
Susan and she—God rest all Christian souls!—
Were of an age. Well, Susan is with God;
She was too good for me. But as I said,
On Lammas Eve at night shall she be fourteen.
That shall she; marry, I remember it well.
'Tis since the earthquake now eleven years,

[II.iv.37-44]

Obsessed as he may be, Mercutio has the style to take his death wound as gallantly as anyone in Shakespeare:

Romeo. Courage, man, the hurt cannot be much.
Mer. No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door, but 'tis enough, 'twill serve. Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man. I am peppered, I warrant for this world. A plague o' both your houses.

[III.i.96-101]

That indeed is what in his death Mercutio becomes, a plague upon both Romeo of the Montagues and Juliet of the Capulets, since henceforward the tragedy speeds on to its final double catastrophe. Shakespeare is already Shakespeare in his subtle patterning, although rather overlyrical

And she was wean'd—I never shall forget it—
 Of all the days of the year upon that day.
 For I had then laid wormwood to my dug,
 Sitting in the sun under the dovehouse wall.
 My lord and you were then at Mantua—
 Nay I do bear a brain. But as I said,
 When it did taste the wormwood on the nipple
 Of my dug and felt it bitter, pretty fool,
 To see it tetchy and fall out with the dug.
 Shake! quoth the dovehouse! 'Twas no need, I trow,
 To bid me trudge.
 And since that time it is eleven years.
 For then she could stand high-lone. Nay, by th'rood,
 She could have run and waddled all about;
 For even the day before she broke her brow,
 And then my husband—God be with his soul,
 A was a merry man—took up the child,
 'Yea,' quoth he, 'dost thou fall upon thy face?
 Thou wilt fall backward when thou hast more wit,
 Wilt thou not, Jule?' And, by my holidame,
 The pretty wretch left crying and said 'Ay'.
 To see now how a jest shall come about.
 I warrant, and I should live a thousand years
 I never should forget it. 'Wilt thou not, Jule?' quoth he,
 And, pretty fool, it stinted, and said 'Ay'.

[I.iii.16–48]

Her speech is shrewd and not so simple as first it sounds, and comes short of poignance, because already there is something antipathetic in the Nurse. Juliet, like the Nurse's child, Susan, is too good for the Nurse, and there is an edge to the account of the weaning that is bothersome, since we do not hear the accents of love.

Shakespeare delays any more ultimate revelation of the Nurse's nature until the crucial scene where she fails Juliet. The exchanges here need to

be quoted at length, because Juliet's shock is a new effect for Shakespeare. The Nurse is the person who has been closest to Juliet for all the fourteen years of her life, and suddenly Juliet realizes that what has seemed loyalty and care is something else.

Jul. O God, O Nurse, how shall this be prevented?
 My husband is on earth, my faith in heaven.
 How shall that faith return again to earth
 Unless that husband send it me from heaven
 By leaving earth? Comfort me, counsel me.
 Alack, alack, that heaven should practise stratagems
 Upon so soft a subject as myself.
 What sayst thou? Hast thou not a word of joy?
 Some comfort, Nurse.
Nurse. Faith, here it is:
 Romeo is banish'd, and all the world to nothing
 That he dares ne'er come back to challenge you,
 Or if he do, it needs must be by stealth.
 Then, since the case so stands as now it doth,
 I think it best you married with the County.
 O, he's a lovely gentleman.
 Romeo's a dishclout to him. An eagle, madam,
 Hath not so green, so quick, so fair an eye
 As Paris hath. Beshrew my very heart,
 I think you are happy in this second match,
 For it excels your first; or if it did not,
 Your first is dead, or 'twere as good he were
 As living here and you no use of him.

Jul. Speakest thou from thy heart?
Nurse. And from my soul too, else beshrew them both.
Jul. Amen.
Nurse. What?
Jul. Well, thou hast comforted me marvellous much.
 Go in, and tell my lady I am gone,

Having displeas'd my father, to Laurence' cell,
To make confession and to be absolv'd.
Nurse. Marry, I will; and this is wisely done.

Jul. Ancient damnation! O most wicked fiend,

Is it more sin to wish me thus forsworn,

Or to dispraise my lord with that same tongue

Which she hath praised him with above compare

So many thousand times? Go, counsellor.

Thou and my bosom henceforth shall be twain.

I'll to the friar, to know his remedy.

If all else fail, myself have power to die.

[III.v.204-42]

The more-than-poignant: "that heaven should practise stratagems / Upon so soft a subject as myself" is answered by the Nurse's astonishing "comfort": "it excels your first; or if it did not, / Your first is dead." The Nurse's argument is valid if convenience is everything; since Juliet is in love, we hear instead an overwhelming rejection of the Nurse, proceeding from the eloquent "amen" on to the dry: "Well, thou hast comforted me marvellous much." The Nurse indeed is "Ancient damnation! O most wicked fiend," and we will hardly hear from her again until Juliet "dies" her first death in this play. Like Mercutio, the Nurse moves us at last to distrust every apparent value in the tragedy except the lovers' commitment to each other.

5

Juliet, and not Romeo, or even Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, dies her second death as a prefiguration of Hamlet's charismatic splendor. Romeo, though he changes enormously under her influence, remains subject to anger and to despair, and is as responsible as Mercutio and Tybalt are for the catastrophe. Having slain Tybalt, Romeo cries out that he has become "Fortune's fool." We would wince if Juliet called herself "Fortune's fool," since she is as nearly flawless as her situation allows, and we recall instead her wry

prayer: "Be fickle, Fortune." Perhaps any playgoer or any reader remembers best Romeo and Juliet's aubade after their single night of fulfillment:

Jul. Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day.

It was the nightingale and not the lark

That pierc'd the fearful hollow of thine ear.

Nightly she sings on yond pomegranate tree.

Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.

Rom. It was the lark, the herald of the morn,

No nightingale. Look, love, what envious streaks

Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east.

Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day

Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.

I must be gone and live, or stay and die.

Jul. Yond light is not daylight, I know it, I.

It is some meteor that the sun exhales

To be to thee this night a torchbearer

And light thee on thy way to Mantua.

Therefore stay yet: Thou need'st not to be gone.

Rom. Let me be ta'en, let me be put to death.

I am content, so thou wilt have it so.

I'll say yon grey is not the morning's eye,

'Tis but the pale reflex of Cynthia's brow.

Nor that is not the lark whose notes do beat

The vaulty heaven so high above our heads.

I have more care to stay than will to go.

Come death, and welcome. Juliet wills it so.

How is't, my soul? Let's talk. It is not day.

Jul. It is, it is. Hie hence, begone, away.

It is the lark that sings so out of tune,

Straining harsh discords and unpleasing sharps.

Some say the lark makes sweet division.

This doth not so, for she divideth us.

Some say the lark and loathed toad change eyes.

O, now I would they had chang'd voices too,
Since arm from arm that voice doth us affray,
Hunting thee hence with hunt's-up to the day.
O now be gone, more light and light it grows.
Rom. More light and light: more dark and dark our woes.

[III. v. 1–36]

Exquisite in itself, this is also a subtle epitome of the tragedy of this tragedy, for the entire play could be regarded as a dawn song that, alas, is out of phase. A bemused audience, unless the director is shrewd, is likely to become skeptical that event after event arrives in the untimeliest way possible. Romeo and Juliet's aubade is so disturbing precisely because they are not courtly love sophisticates working through a stylized ritual. The courtly lover confronts the possibility of a real-enough death if he lingers too long, because his partner is an adulterous wife. But Juliet and Romeo know that death after dawn would be Romeo's punishment, not for adultery, but merely for marriage. The subtle outrageousness of Shakespeare's drama is that everything is against the lovers: their families and the state, the indifference of nature, the vagaries of time, and the regressive movement of the cosmological contraries of love and strife. Even had Romeo transcended his anger; even if Mercutio and the Nurse were not quarrelsome busybodies, the odds are too great against the triumph of love. That is the aubade's undersong, made explicit in Romeo's great outcry against the contraries: "More light and light: more dark and dark our woes."

What was Shakespeare trying to do for himself as a playwright by composing *Romeo and Juliet*? Tragedy did not come easily to Shakespeare, yet all this play's lyricism and comic genius cannot hold off the dawn that will become a destructive darkness. With just a few alterations, Shakespeare could have transformed *Romeo and Juliet* into a play as cheerful as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The young lovers, escaped to Mantua or Padua, would not have been victims of Verona, or of bad timing, or of cosmological contraries asserting their sway. Yet this travesty would have been intolerable for us, and for Shakespeare: a passion as absolute as Romeo's and Juliet's cannot consort with comedy. Mere sexuality will do for comedy, but the

shadow of death makes eroticism the companion of tragedy. Shakespeare, in *Romeo and Juliet*, eschews Chaucerian irony, but he takes from *The Knight's Tale* Chaucer's intimation that we are always keeping appointments we haven't made. Here it is the sublime appointment kept by Paris and Romeo at Juliet's supposed tomb, which soon enough becomes both her authentic tomb and their own. What is left on stage at the close of this tragedy is an absurd pathos: the wretched Friar Laurence, who fearfully abandoned Juliet, a widowed Montague, who vows to have a statue of Juliet raised in pure gold; the Capulets vowing to end a feud already spent in five deaths—those of Mercutio, Tybalt, Paris, Romeo, and Juliet. The closing curtain of any proper production of the play should descend upon these final ironies, presented as ironies, and not as images of reconciliation. As is *Julius Caesar* after it, *Romeo and Juliet* is a training ground in which Shakespeare teaches himself remorselessness and prepares the way for his five great tragedies, starting with the *Hamlet* of 1600–1601.