

Introduction to *Romeo and Juliet*

by John Wilders

Romeo and Juliet contains one of the best-known lines in the literature of the world, the words spoken by Juliet as she stands on her balcony, unaware of Romeo concealed in the darkness of the orchard below:

O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?

The line has become celebrated not by accident but because Shakespeare used all the resources of his art to ensure that it would make a deep impression on his audience. To try and discover why it creates such an effect is to learn something about Shakespeare's skill as a dramatist and about the tragedy itself. The power of the line is produced partly by the care with which Shakespeare has placed it in relation to what has gone before, and partly by the implications of the few, simple words themselves, which have a significance for Juliet's predicament, for the play generally and for the human condition as Shakespeare portrays it.

Shakespeare has been preparing the audience for this moment from the very start of the tragedy and, when it occurs, it breaks upon us both as a climax and a summary of the action. By this point in the play we are well aware of the long-continued feud between the Montagues and the Capulets and have seen it burst into open violence; we have felt the danger in which Romeo has placed himself by going disguised to the Capulets' ball; we have watched the first encounter between Romeo and Juliet and their instantaneous passion for each other, an adoration they can express only guardedly, because neither knows how the other will respond, and furtively in the threatening presence of his enemies and her family. When, therefore, the two are at last alone in the orchard, we are gratified for their sakes and attentive to their words. The balcony scene, moreover, stands out in contrast to the two scenes which have preceded it, the brightly-lit, animated, crowded scene at the ball (Iv) and the rowdy, high-spirited street scene (Iii) in which Benvolio and Mercutio shout obscenities at the hidden Romeo. The change of focus from the street to the orchard is from noise to stillness, bawdy jokes to romantic love, the open

streets to the enclosed garden where the darkness is illuminated by the single light from Juliet's balcony towards which Romeo gazes. Moreover, though the lovers are now alone, Juliet is unaware of Romeo's presence and the suspense is heightened because, for a while, she says nothing; her first sound is an expressive 'Ay me!' It is at this carefully prepared moment, as though in reply to Romeo's unheard plea, 'O, speak again, bright angel,' that she delivers the lines which Shakespeare's art has made memorable.

*O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny they father and refuse they name;
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.*

Romeo and Juliet, whatever else we may think of it, is obviously the work of a man who knows how to sustain and control the responses of an audience.

Juliet's actual words have a significance for the rest of the tragedy. Her first line is a question about names, and names have a particular importance in this play. For example, when Juliet has first met Romeo at the ball, she sends the nurse with the instruction, 'Go ask his name.' Again, when the newly-married Romeo encounters Tybalt, he addresses him as

*Good Capulet – which name I tender
As dearly as mine own.*

And Romeo's sense of his own name is expressed most violently when, after he has killed Tybalt and lies concealed in the Friar's cell, he treats it as though it had an independent existence;

*That name's cursed hand
Murder'd her kinsman. 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.*

His impulse is to destroy himself and thereby to eradicate his own guilty name.

Each of the lovers has a family name, Montague and Capulet, and these represent the unbreakable chains which bind them to their respective, warring households; it represents the enmity into which they have been born. And each has a unique name, Romeo and Juliet, which signifies his individuality, those qualities which distinguish and separate each of them from all the other Montagues and Capulets. 'Romeo' signifies the particular 'face, leg, hand, foot and boys' to which the nurse refers admiringly and with which Juliet has fallen in love. One way of understanding the play is to see it as the attempt and the tragic failure of the two young people to 'deny their names; and thereby to become exclusively themselves. They are, needless to say, attempting the impossible.

Juliet's 'Wherefore?' (or 'For what cause?') is one of the lovers' many uncomprehending protests against a hidden and malevolent power in the heavens which has decreed that the one person most dear to them should have been born into that family which most hates their own; 'My only love sprung from my only hate!', as Juliet succinctly declares. It is against this same power that Romeo cries out in the most bitterly searching lines of the play;

Heaven is here

*Where Juliet lives, and every cat and dog,
And little mouse, every unworthy thing,
Liver here in heaven, and my look on her;
But Romeo may not.*

This is an anguished complaint against the injustice of the supernatural powers which seem to govern the world. Shakespeare, incidentally, was to recall and revise these words of Romeo's in the most tragically bleak moment in his entire works, the moment when King Lear stands, holding in his arms the body of his dearest child.

No, No, no life!

*Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
And thou no breath at all?*

As well as being, at this relatively early stage in his career, a brilliantly skilled writer for the theatre, Shakespeare was also able to look beyond the immediate, specific predicament of his characters to the greater metaphysical powers which seem to have placed them in it.

Shakespeare shows us very vividly what it means to be a Capulet and a Montague. His quick lively sketches of domestic life of the Capulets are among the small triumphs of *Romeo and Juliet*. The family belongs to the wealthy Italian upper middle class which he had already portrayed in *The Taming of the Shrew*, written about a year earlier. It is dominated by the father, a fussy, impatient, easily flustered little dictator, generously hospitable to his guests, but determined to impose his will over the younger generation, such as Tybalt (when the latter struggles to attack Romeo during the ball), and particularly Juliet when she defiantly refuses to marry Paris. Shakespeare rapidly sketches into the background of the play the agitation and concern for material comfort in the Capulet family by inserting a short dialogue between the servants at the opening of the scene at the ball.

*Away with the join-stools, remove the court-cubher, look to the plate. Good
thou, save me a piece of marchpane; and as thou love me let the porter let in Susan
Grindstone and Nell. Antony, and Potpan!*

We can size up the Capulets on the evidence of these two hurriedly spoken sentences: the sense of confusion (also conveyed by Capulet himself during the ball) suggests that they do not put on their social entertainments with quite the ease and confidence of the aristocracy, yet they are wealthy enough to possess silver plate, to serve marchpane (marzipan) to their guests, and to employ a number of servants. (Since they have to be 'let in,' Susan, Nell, Antony and Potpan may be extra, hired help.) A similar impression is created as the family prepare through the night for the wedding reception with such haste that Juliet's parents themselves appear to be giving a hand with the cooking.

Lady Capulet. Hold, take these keys and fetch more spices, nurse
Nurse. They call for quinces and dates in the pastry.
*Capulet. Come, stir, stir, stir! The second cock hath crow'd,
The curfew bell hath rung, 'tis three o'clock.
Look to the bak'd meats, good Angelica;
Spare not for cost.*

It is consistent with what we know of her family background that, during her first scene (Iiii), Juliet is shown to be a thoroughly conventional, polite, submissive daughter. She is, after all, only thirteen, and when she first appears she remains almost totally silent for nearly seventy lines. On being asked whether she is inclined to marriage, she modestly replies,

It is an honour that I dream not of,

And she agrees to love only a man whom her parents have chosen for her. It is easy to imagine what Juliet might have become: married to a Count, comfortably well off, producing grandchildren for her parents to dote over, and remaining passive and conventional for the rest of her life. Her love for Romeo transforms her life and personality: she acquires an independence of mind, sleeps in secret with her husband under her parents' roof, defies her father's wrath, and resolutely kills herself when Romeo is dead. She ceases to be a Capulet and becomes Juliet. Yet by the process of coming to life she ensures her early death. 'So quick bright things come to confusion.'

Shakespeare shows us very little of Romeo's parents, and their relative absence is deliberate, for we see a great deal of his companions: he is at the age when young men stay out late and roam the streets in gangs. Shakespeare has identified a difference between the young Italian male and female which can still be seen today. Benvolio and Mercutio are boisterous, earthy, daring, irresponsible youths, affectionate towards one another but contemptuous of their sworn enemies, the Capulets. In their own way they are as conventional as Juliet's parents. Romeo has already, early in the play, begun to move away from the group as a result of his infatuation with his first love, Rosaline, but his passion for Juliet divorces him completely from them. This separation is shown visually in the scene (Iii) where, as his friends call out for him in the street, he hides from them behind the Capulets' wall. Again, when, after his marriage, he is challenged by Tybalt, he replies most unconventionally:

*I do protest I never injur'd thee,
But love thee better than thou canst devise
'Till thou shalt know the reason of my love;
And so, good Capulet – which name I tender
As dearly as mine own – be satisfied.*

–a response which Mercutio treats with shocked contempt. In acquiring a wife, Romeo has lost the qualities which marked him as a Montague, a member of the gang; Juliet’s beauty, as he puts it, has made him effeminate and he tries, disastrously, to stop the quarrel. His love, like hers, raises him above convention and yet contributes to his – and Mercutio’s – death. Their love makes the hero and heroine fully themselves and also ruins them. By a similar paradox, each commits suicide as the supreme expression of love for the other. Their end is a death in love and a love in death.

The Montagues and the Capulets resemble each other, however, in the extreme intensity of their emotions. The first image Shakespeare gives us is of the violent enmity between the two families, a smouldering animosity which, within seconds, flares up into physical violence, sparked off by Tybalt’s ferocious challenge.

*What, drawn, and talk of peace! I hate the word,
As I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee.*

Capulet is constantly in a state of fevered agitation which turns to rage when his will is crossed by Tybalt or Juliet. Moreover, the families are as unrestrained in sorrow as they are in hatred. Romeo’s reaction to the news of his banishment is to collapse on the floor, ‘blubbing and weeping, weeping and blubbing,’ and, on the apparent death of their daughter, the Capulets pour out their grief in a great torrent of complaint and lamentation. So violent are their passions that some of the characters shake, physically, under their pressure. Tybalt’s ‘flesh trembles; with rage, and the nurse, taunted by the young Montagues, becomes so vexed that ‘every part’ about her ‘quivers.’ The overwhelming love which Romeo and Juliet experience is, therefore, consistent with the high emotions which possess almost everyone. Only the Friar remains calm, cautious and fearful of its consequences.

*These violent delights have violent ends,
And in their triumph die; like fire and powder,
Which, as they kiss, consume.*

The impression of lives lived intensely is also created by the high speed at which the action moves. No sooner do the servants meet than they fight; no sooner have the lovers glimpsed each other than they

become infatuated; no sooner does Romeo hear of Juliet's death than he resolves on suicide, demanding a poison that will work

As violently as hasty powder fir'd

Doth hurry from the fatal cannon's womb.

As soon as she sees her husband's body, Juliet unhesitatingly kills herself. The action of the play, as Shakespeare takes care to inform us, occupies only four days. The opening brawl takes place on a Sunday morning, the lovers meet that night, are married on the Monday afternoon, and rise from their night together the following morning. On that same Tuesday, Juliet drinks the potion and is discovered by the nurse early on Wednesday. By dawn on the Thursday, both are dead. The tragedy seems to be driven forward by the emotional ferocity of the characters.

Shakespeare interrupts the headlong rush of the action, however, with interludes where time seems to be suspended. They occur, as we might expect, when Romeo and Juliet are alone, and the motionless tranquility of their meetings is one of the qualities which isolates them from everyone else. They attempt to make for themselves a private world, cut off from the time-bound activities of ancient feuds and hasty matchmaking. They struggle in vain towards the kind of love celebrated in the poetry of Donne (which was written at about the same time as this play, 1595), a love where 'nothing else is,' one which

No tomorrow hath, nor yesterday,

Running it never runs from us away,

But truly keeps his first, last, everlasting day.

Circumstances make such an achievement impossible. They are alone together only three times: in the Capulets' orchard, in Juliet's bedroom and in the tomb, a hasty, secretive courtship, marriage and death which make their tragedy the more pitiful. The apparent immunity of their world is suggested by the fact that they meet only at night and in enclosed spaces. This is partly for practical reasons – they fear to be discovered – but it also creates the impression of an intimate, night-time world where they alone are fully awake. The darkness is illuminated for them by their own brightness. Each refers to the other as a light: to Romeo, Juliet's window is 'the east' and she 'the sun;'; to Juliet, Romeo should be 'cut out in

little stars' which would make all the world 'in love with night.' Shakespeare makes good dramatic use of Juliet's balcony, a secret, magical place which can be reached only with difficulty and danger: the physical height of the balcony raises them metaphorically above the rest of the world, an idea which Romeo expresses as he stands in the orchard, gazing upwards at Juliet.

*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
Unto the white-upturned wond'ring eyes
Of mortals that fall back to gaze on him,
When he bestrides the lazy-pacing clouds
And sails upon the bosom of the air.*

Their privacy is, however, always at risk and always invaded by an alien world. their courtship is interrupted by the impatient call of the nurse, and their wedding night by the fateful song of the lark which summons Romeo to his banishment.

Each of the lovers has a close companion and confidant who seems to be helpful to them but, in the event, proves fatal. Mercutio and the nurse are the most fully and distinctively characterized people in the play. The former, like Romeo, is only partially engaged in the family feud, which he regards with a half-mocking detachment, yet, like Romeo, he becomes a victim of it. In the 'Queen Mab' speech, a kind of aria without music, Shakespeare reveals the man's witty intelligence (in contrast to Romeo's romantic passion), his sociability as an entertainer and his worldly sophistication. At the same time he establishes him as a substantial, engaging figure in order that his death may create a serious sense of loss. The nurse is the most recognizably human of all the character: as soon as he embarks on her first, rambling, affectionate, earthy reminiscences of Juliet as a baby, she stands solidly real. Like many women of easy morals she is sentimental and is sufficiently detached from the war of the families, acting as a go-between for the lovers, that we trust her as a dependable ally. The moment when she casually reveals that she is not comes, therefore, as a brutal shock.

*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.

Not only is she advising bigamy to a newly-married, thirteen-year-old girl, but she shows a blindness towards Juliet's kind of love which leaves the heroine completely isolated. Thus deprived, through Mercutio's death, Romeo's banishment and the nurses' betrayal, of their only allies, the lovers are left to meet their deaths in pitiful isolation.

Shakespeare seems to have thought of *Romeo and Juliet* as a tragedy of fate, brought about by supernatural forces which the lovers are too weak to resist. They are 'star-crossed' lovers, whose 'ill-divining souls' dimly foresee 'some bitter consequence yet hanging in the stars' which will destroy them. Romeo's impulse on hearing of Juliet's death is to taunt the heavens who have contrived it.

Is it e'en so? Then, I defy you, stars.

And he welcomes his own suicide as a positive act which will

Shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world-wearied flesh.

In fact, the tragedy results from a variety of causes: the rash, impulsive actions of nearly all the protagonists, the sheer bad luck, which delays Friar Lawrence's letter and Juliet's awakening from her trance, the miscarriage of the Friar's well-intentioned plans which, in the end, prove fatal. But *Romeo and Juliet* resembles Shakespeare's later tragedies, such as *Othello* and *Hamlet*, in that the catastrophe is brought about, ironically, by the very qualities in the central characters which most commend them to us. The hero and heroines possess that characteristic which A. C. Bradley recognized in Shakespeare's great tragic heroes, 'a fatal tendency to identify the whole being with one interest, object, passion or habit of mind,' a tragic quality of character 'which is also his greatness,' so that his virtues 'help to destroy him.' Those qualities which distinguish Romeo and Juliet from all the other Montagues and Capulets – their transcendent love, their altruistic courage, the tenderness of their affections, their impulse to be intensely and defiantly themselves – enable them to live more generously for a few hours than other accomplish in a lifetime. Their brief association is both their doom and their triumph.