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Romeo and Juliet

The Meaning of a Theatrical Experience

EVERYTHING in *Romeo and Juliet* is intense, impatient, threatening, explosive. We are caught up in speed, heat, desire, riots, running, jumping, rapid-fire puns, dirty jokes, extravagance, compressed and urgent passion, the pressure of secrets, fire, blood, death. Visually, the play remains memorable for a number of repeated images—street brawls, swords flashing to the hand, torches rushing on and off, crowds rapidly gathering. The upper stage is used frequently, with many opportunities for leaping or scrambling or stretching up and down and much play between upper and lower areas. The dominant bodily feelings we get as an audience are oppressive heat, sexual desire, a frequent whiz-bang exhilarating kinesthesia of speed and clash, and above all a feeling of the keeping-down and separation of highly charged bodies, whose pressure toward release and whose sudden discharge determine the rhythm of the play.

The thematic appropriateness of these sensations to Shakespeare's first great tragedy of the unsounded self is obvious enough, perhaps too obvious. Shakespeare's tragic heroes usually pass from isolation to isolation. Romeo cannot be one of the boys or Hamlet one of his northern world's competent, adaptable young men. At the beginning the isolation is that of the unsounded self, some form of self-sufficiency, remoteness, or withdrawal. The hero strikes us as a kind of closed structure. He very clearly carries a packaged energy; on first meeting him we recognize the container and the seal. (Think of Romeo or Hamlet for swift opening indica-

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tions of these.) The ultimate isolation comes in the rupture of the package, the energy's discharge. The drama marks the change. Romeo and Juliet are isolated by the sudden demands of love returned, and the world of their play reflects the violence of the transformation.

The type of outline just given is useful but treacherous. It is useful because it sharpens our sense of the Shakespearean dramatic situation and gives us a reasonably pertinent norm by which to measure individual developments. But to follow it out in detail, to translate each tragedy back into the outline, to tell it like a story for any of the plays would be to lose exactly what makes the idea of the unsounded self important—that it is basic to drama, something far different from story or subject or theme. This is what is wrong with thinking about theatrical impressions in terms of thematic appropriateness, as a kind of varnish over the poetry and plot.

What ideally has to be done and is perhaps more easily attempted for *Romeo and Juliet* than for later plays is to talk about what the experience of the whole amounts to. The impression is strong and distinctive; why do we mark it as we do? The problem is to take all the elements that affect us in the theater and examine them as they arrange themselves in our response, asking what relevance this configuration bears to our lives.

If we try to see what the deep effect of the combination of these elements is, the crucial question is that of the relation that connects the plot, the visual spectacle, and the wordplay. Clearly they share a common busyness, suddenness, and violence. "These violent delights have violent ends" is enough to explain their congruence at least superficially. But it does not account for the richness of our response to the elaborate detail of the drama. Nor does it account for the peculiar aptness we sense in certain kinds of detail. Why are there so many puns and such obscene ones? Why should Mercutio and the Nurse be given long, digressive bravura

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speeches? Why is the balcony stressed, and the athleticism it entails? Why should certain lines like “Wherefore art thou Romeo?” or “What’s in a name?” or “A feasting presence full of light” stick in the memory? The last may be explained by its “beauty out of context”—always a doubtful procedure—but the other lines resist even that easy question-begging method, and consequently give us a good place to begin.

“Wherefore art thou Romeo?”

Romeo’s name presents a problem to others besides Juliet but she characteristically sees more deeply into the difficulty. For it is not enough to decide whether Romeo should be called humors, madman, passion, lunatic, villain, coward, boy, Capulet, Montague, or even Romeo. The question is really why he must have a name at all. *Romeo and Juliet* is a tragedy of naming, a tragedy in which at times Romeo’s name seems to be the villain:

As if that name,
Shot from the deadly level of a gun,
Did murder her, as 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. (III, iii, 102-08)

But though this echoes Juliet’s other famous question and her insistence that a name is after all “nor hand, nor foot, / Nor arm, nor face,” it is far different from “What’s in a name?” in even its immediate implications. The trouble with Romeo’s name here is not that it is a trivial attribute that raises accidental difficulties, but that “Romeo” now has a history, an inescapable reality of its own. It is the name of the man who has killed Tybalt; it is attached to a past and Romeo is responsible for it. It is Romeo who is banished for what Romeo has done. His anguish, though emotionally an

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intensification of Juliet's in the balcony scene, is logically an answer to her question. This, among other things, is what's in a name.

Not only do names have a peculiar substantiality in the play (they can murder, die, be torn; every tongue that speaks "But Romeo's name speaks heavenly eloquence") but words themselves take on a namelike intensity. That is, they take on, usually by repetition, the importance and attributes of persons:

Say thou but "I"
And that bare vowel "I" shall poison more
Than the death-darting eye of cockatrice.
I am not I, if there be such an I;
Or those eyes shut, that makes thee answer "I."¹

"... banished."
That "banished," that one word "banished,"
Hath slain ten thousand Tybalts.
(III, ii, 45-49, 112-14)

Here, as with "day" in IV, v,² the effect in the theater is not to deepen the meaning of the word but at once to strip the meaning away through endless repetition and to give it a namelike life of its own.

As these examples suggest, naming is characteristically associated with separation in the play. It is no accident that at the time of painful separation on the morning after their marriage the lovers' aubade turns on the name of a bird:

It was the nightingale, and not the lark. . .

It was the lark, the herald of the morn,
No nightingale. (III, v, 2-7)

¹ Restoring the Q₂ reading of "T" for "ay" in ll. 45, 48, and 49.

² Most lamentable day, most woeful day,
That ever, ever, I did yet behold!
O day! O day! O day! O hateful day!
Never was seen so black a day as this.
O woeful day, O woeful day! (50-54)

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They are passing from a night of sensual union to a day of exile. Night, as Mercutio has observed, is a time of free association, of fantastic invention, but day makes stricter demands upon our consciousness. When Romeo agrees to call the bird by some other name, Juliet must quickly admit that it is indeed the lark. The lovers relinquish the right to rename the world as they please; they must know the world's names for things if they wish to stay alive in it.

The play's everpresent thrust toward punning heightens our sense of the accepted meaning of words and of the rampant psychic energy that rises to break the meanings down. The wordplay makes its contribution as much by its quantity and irrepressibility as by its content. The puns are rapid and raw, emphasizing the suddenness and violence that is part of all punning, while the very process of punning raises issues that are central to the play. A pun is a sudden exchange of names, uniting objects we are not ordinarily allowed to unite, with a consequent release of energy, often violent and satisfying, and always satisfying to the extent that it is violent. It is something both terrible and lovely; we say "That's awful," when we mean "That's good." Romeo and Juliet themselves are like the components of a particularly good pun—natural mates whom authority strives to keep apart and whose union is not only violent but illuminating, since it transforms and improves the order it violates, though it is necessarily impermanent.

The fury of the pun is the fury of our submerged innocence; we play with words as Romeo and Juliet play with the lark and nightingale. Punning restores to us—under certain very narrow conditions, and for a brief interval—our freedom to change names and to make connections we have been taught to suppress, to invent language, to reconstitute the world as we please. *Romeo and Juliet* begins with a series of puns leading to a street brawl culminating in a dangerous mistake

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(Benvolio, intending to restore order, draws his sword) that spreads the conflict to include nearly the entire company. The sequence is significant, for the energy of the pun, fully released in an organized society where names and rules are important, tends to be disastrous. Capulet and Montague lackeys lurk around the stage like forbidden meanings looking for an opportunity to discharge themselves. And at the level of responsible authority, the equivalent of the lackeys' idle brawling (or the overwhelming passion of the young lovers) is the capacity for instant and mistaken decision. From Benvolio's intervention in the opening street brawl to Romeo's suicide in the tomb, the play is a tissue of precipitous mistakes. Capulet hands a guest list to a servant who cannot read and the tragedy is initiated (significantly it is a list of names—all of which are read out—that is the villain). Mercutio's death is a mistake; and Romeo's error, like Capulet's and Benvolio's, enacts itself as a backfiring gesture, an action that—like a pun—subverts its manifest intention. Romeo's pathetic "I thought all for the best," rings in our ears when we see Lawrence and Capulet stricken by the lovers' death.

Counter to all the hasty and disastrous action of the play, there runs a surge of simple authoritative confidence, voiced at different times by almost every major character. The first scene ends with Romeo's assertion that he will always love Rosaline. As Romeo goes off, Capulet enters insisting that it will be easy to keep the peace. The juxtaposition of these two errors goes beyond simple irony; the encounter between confident assumption and the sudden event is one of the play's important motifs, just as the disparity between principle and practice is one of its recurrent themes. The Friar's first speech, for example, is often seen as a moralization of the action of *Romeo and Juliet*, and indeed there is a clear and effective dramatic connection between his homily and the action that surrounds

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it. The contrast between the night-time intensity of the scene immediately preceding, and the complacent tranquillity of Lawrence's reflections is obviously intended, and to further enforce the connection, he begins by moralizing the contrast:

The grey-ey'd morn smiles on the frowning
night . . .
And flecked darkness like a drunkard reels
From forth day's path. (II, iii, 1-4)

As he goes on, he seems to anticipate events that are to follow, but on closer inspection, his remarks are not precisely appropriate:

Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied;
And vice sometime's by action dignified.
(2I-22)

The first of these lines fits the lovers and much else in the play, but the second, though on the surface equally fitting, turns out to be harder to apply. Romeo is apparently acting in accordance with its teaching when he buys forbidden poison to use on himself, as is Capulet when he decides that a hasty marriage (which he has earlier roundly denounced) will rouse Juliet from her sorrows, or as the Nurse is when she advises Juliet to marry Paris. And Friar Lawrence certainly imagines he is taking a virtuous course when he offers poison to Juliet. By the play's end, of course, Lawrence's intervention has proved an example of virtue misapplied. The very confidence of his assertions becomes a source of disaster when he acts, and the very ease of his rhetoric is part of the texture of his actions. Friar Lawrence makes a strong bid to be the moral center of the play, but it is his bid that finally interests us more than his vision. Just as he shares a penchant for confidently interpreting events with Capulet, the Nurse, and Ro-

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meo, among others, like them he has a disturbing capacity for guessing wrong.

At the end of the play Lawrence is pardoned. "We still have known thee for a holy man." The Friar deserves his reputation, and it is as necessary to society that he have his name for holiness as that he utter his sound and inappropriate *sententiae*. If he were not capable of making terrible mistakes, there would be no need of him. We must have friars and fathers, and all the system of responsibility that goes with naming, for the very reason that these figures fail in their responsibility: there is an energy in life that changes names, that breaks down the rules of language, of law, and even of luck.³

Romeo and Juliet bear the brunt of discovering this energy, and, like all tragic victims, they are isolated—even from each other—before they are destroyed. Characteristically, we remember them as separated: the drug comes between them in the final scene, earlier the balcony divides them; in the nightingale-lark scene they are together only at the moment of leave-taking. On all three occasions, the probable use of the stage serves to underline the strain that the effort toward contact demands of them—in Romeo's yearning upward toward the balcony, the perilous rope-ladder descent, the torches and crowbars breaking into the tomb. And of course there are always insistent voices—Mercutio and his friends, the Nurse, Paris, the watch—calling

³ The play is famous for its long arias, of which there are two kinds. The speeches of the lovers are expressions of their isolation and desire; separated from each other, they speak at length. The Nurse, Mercutio, and Capulet, however, are given great bursts of speech in company; and the reaction of those around them is important. Their set-pieces are met with outcry; but they are carried away and will not stop. Each is a force in nature breaking into the expected or permissible flow of things; each imitates the impulsive action of the play, "of nothing first create"; each adds to the prevailing sense of impatience and irrepressible energy.

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them away, repeating their names, threatening to interrupt them.

It is not fanciful to see their last scene in the tomb as suggestive of sexual union and of the sexual act. A battle takes place at the door, it is torn open—and on stage the barrier is finally only a curtain that gives easily enough after some bloodshed. It is also almost certainly the same inner stage or pavilion where Juliet has gone to bed on the eve of her wedding to Paris, and so it must remind the audience of that innocent chamber. (The curtains close as she falls on the bed, are opened in iv, v to show her apparently dead, and only open again, revealing her still prostrate, as Romeo breaks into the tomb.) The identification is given force by the new stream of wordplay that has entered since Tybalt's death, reversing the dominant pun of the play. Up to that point the language of combat has been transformed by punning into suggestions of sexual encounter ("Draw thy tool"); but in the concluding scenes, violent death is repeatedly described in terms of sex and the marriage festival. Romeo vows, "Well, Juliet, I will lie with thee tonight," meaning he will die; the lovers toast each other with poison ("Here's to my love," "This do I drink to thee"); and, in one of the great condensing images of the play, Juliet's beauty makes the "vault a feasting presence full of light." This last phrase catches up the play's repeated impressions of light and fire illuminating the night and suffuses the death of the lovers with a suggestion of their long-denied marriage banquet.

Romeo and Juliet, with its emphasis on language, young love, and the affectations and confusions of both, has clear affinities with the Shakespearean comedies of its period. Except for its fatalities, it follows the standard form of New Comedy. The two lovers are kept apart by a powerful external authority (some form of parental opposition is of course typical), and much of the action concerns their efforts to get around the

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obstacles placed in their path. Their ultimate union—in a marriage feast—results in a transformation of the society that has opposed them.

Like Romeo, Juliet, as she moves toward tragedy, is sometimes treated in a manner familiar from the early comedies: a sense of the “real” is produced by contrasting serious and superficial versions of the same situation or event. As Romeo progresses in seriousness from Rosaline to Juliet, so Juliet advances through at least three stages to her waking in the tomb. Lawrence sends her on her way with his usual cheery assurance, and even Romeo approaches his descent into the grave with a kind of boyish eagerness, but Juliet goes beyond them. Originally she shares their confident reading of the scene:

. . . bid me go into a new-made grave
And hide me with a dead man in his shroud,—
Things that, to hear them told, have made me
tremble;
And I will do it without fear or doubt.
(IV, i, 84-87)

But her anticipatory vision of the tomb in IV, iii powerfully forecasts her actual fate:

What if it be a poison, which the friar
Subtly hath minist'ed to have me dead . . .
How if, when I am laid into the tomb,
I wake before the time that Romeo
Come to redeem me? . . .
The horrible conceit of death and night,
Together with the terror of the place,—
As in a vault, an ancient receptacle,
Where, for this many hundred years, the
bones
Of all my buried ancestors are pack'd;
Where bloody Tybalt, yet but green in earth,
Lies fest'ring in his shroud. . . (24-43)

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"Fear and doubt" do afflict her, but it is even more notable that Juliet is the only one in the play who begins to guess what the final scene will be like.

In the tomb itself, Juliet continues to display her distinctive isolation and awareness. Her fate is given a final impressiveness by a gesture that carries on the special violence of the play. Shakespeare follows his source, Brooke's *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*, in having Juliet commit suicide with Romeo's knife. But his Juliet, unlike Brooke's, first canvasses other ways to die—the poisoned cup, a kiss. These deaths, like Romeo's, are elegant, leave no mark upon the body, and have the comforting theatrical import of an easy transcendence of death—but they are not available to her; the impulsive pace of the action will not allow it. The watch is heard. She reaches for the dagger instead:

This is thy sheath; there rust, and let me die.

(v, iii, 170)

The death is messy, violent, sexual. It is interesting that Romeo's is the more virginal, and that Juliet's is the first in the play that has not been immediately caused by a misunderstanding.

Against the play's general background, its rapidly assembling crowds, its fevered busyness, its continual note of impatience and the quick violence of its encounters, the image that remains most strongly in our minds is not of the lovers as a couple, but of each as a separate individual grappling with internal energies that both threaten and express the self, energies for which language is inadequate but that lie at the root of language, that both overturn and enrich society. Touched by adult desire, the unsounded self bursts out with the explosive, subversive, dangerous energy of the sword, gunpowder, the plague; and every aspect of our experience of *Romeo and Juliet* in the theater engages us in this phenomenon—from the crude rush

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of the brawling lackeys to the subliminal violence of the puns. We undergo, in a terrible condensation like the lightning-flash, the self-defining, self-immolating surge with which adolescence is left behind. As Juliet swiftly outgrows the comforts of the family circle, so Romeo moves far from the youthful packs that roam the streets of Verona, so many Adonises hunting and scorning. The lovers remain in the audience's minds in a typical pose and atmosphere, lights burning in the darkness, their names called, their farewells taken, each isolated in a moment of violent and enlightening desire.