An Essay by Harold Bloom

Shakespeare’s first authentic tragedy has sometimes been critically undervalued, perhaps because of its popularity. Though *Romeo and Juliet* is a triumph of dramatic lyricism, its tragic ending usurps most other aspects of the play and abandons us to unhappy estimates of whether, and to what degree, its young lovers are responsible for their own catastrophe. Harold Goddard lamented that the Prologue’s “A pair of star-cross’d lovers take their life” had “surrendered this drama to the astrologers,”though more than the stars in their courses are to blame for the destruction of the superb Juliet. Alas, half a century after Goddard, the tragedy more frequently is surrendered to commissars of gender and power, who can thrash the patriarchy, including Shakespeare himself, for victimizing Juliet.

Thomas McAlindon in his refreshingly sane *Shakespeare’s Tragic Cosmos* (1991) traces the dynamics of conflict in the dramatistback to the rival worldviews of Heraclitus and Empedocles, as refined and modified in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale.* ForHeraclitus, all things flowed, as Empedocles visualized a strife betweenLove and Death. Chaucer, rather than Ovid or ChristopherMarlowe, was the ancestor of Shakespeare’s greatest originality, that invention of the human. Chaucer’s ironic yet amiable version of the religion of love, more perhaps in his *Troilus and Criseyde* thanin *The Knight’s Tale,* is the essential context for *Romeo and Juliet.*Time’s ironies govern love in Chaucer, as they will in *Romeo and Juliet.* Chaucer’s human nature is essentially Shakespeare’s: thedeepest link between the two greatest English poets was temperamentalrather than intellectual or sociopolitical. Love dies or elselovers die: those are the pragmatic possibilities for the two poets, each of them experientially wise beyond wisdom. Shakespeare, somewhat unlike Chaucer, shied away from depictingthe death of love rather than the death of lovers. Does anyone, except Hamlet, ever fall out of love in Shakespeare?Hamlet denies anyway that he ever loved Ophelia, and I believehim. By the time the play ends, he loves no one, whether it be the dead Ophelia or the dead father, the dead Gertrude or the deadYorick, and one wonders if this frightening charismatic evercould have loved anyone. If there were an act 6 to Shakespeare’scomedies, doubtless many of the concluding marriages would approximatethe condition of Shakespeare’s own union with Anne

Hathaway. My observation, of course, is nonsensical if you would have it so, but most of the Shakespearean audience—then, now, and always—goes on believing that Shakespeare uniquely represented realities. Poor Falstaff never will stop loving Hal, and the admirably Christian Antonio always will pine for Bassanio. Whom Shakespeare himself loved we do not know, but the Sonnets seem more than a fiction and, at least in this aspect of life, Shakespeare evidently was not so cold as his Hamlet. There are mature lovers in Shakespeare, most notably Antony and Cleopatra, who cheerfully sell each other out for reasons of state, yet return to each other in their suicides. Both Romeo Antony kill themselves because they falsely think their beloveds are dead (Antony bungles the suicide, as he does everything else). The most passionate marriage in Shakespeare, the Macbeths’, subtly appears to have its sexual difficulties and ends in madness

and suicide for Queen Macbeth, prompting the most equivocal of elegiac reflections by her usurping husband.“Yet Edmund was belov’d,” the icy villain of *King Lear* overhears himself saying, when the bodies of Goneril and Regan are brought in. The varieties of passionate love between the sexes are endlessly Shakespeare’s concern; sexual jealousy finds its most flamboyantartists in Othello and Leontes, but the virtual identity of the tormentsof love and jealousy is a Shakespearean invention, later to be refined by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Marcel Proust. Shakespeare, more than any other author, has instructed the West in the catastrophes of sexuality, and has invented the formula that the sexual becomes the erotic when crossed by the shadow of death. There had to be one high song of the erotic by Shakespeare, one lyrical and tragicomical paean celebrating an unmixed love and lamenting its inevitable destruction. *Romeo and Juliet* is unmatched, in Shakespeare and in the world’s literature, as a vision of an uncompromising mutual love that perishes of its own idealism and intensity. There are a few isolated instances of realistic distincts in Shakespeare’s characters before *Romeo and Juliet:* Launce in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona,* the Bastard Faulconbridge in *King John,* Richard II, self-destructive king and superb metaphysical poet.The fourfold of Juliet, Mercutio, the Nurse, and Romeo outnumber and overgo these earlier breakthroughs in human invention. *Romeo and Juliet* matters, as a play, because of these four exuberantlyrealized characters.

It is easier to see the vividness of Mercutio and the Nurse than it is to absorb and sustain the erotic greatness of Juliet and the heroic effort of Romeo to approximate her sublime state of being in love.Shakespeare, with a prophetic insight,knows that he must lead his audience beyond Mercutio’s obscene ironies if they are tobe worthy of apprehending Juliet, for her sublimity *is* the play and guarantees the tragedy of this tragedy. Mercutio, the scene stealer of the play, had to be killed off if it was to remain Juliet’s and Romeo’s play; keep Mercutio in acts 4 and 5, and the contention of love and death would have to cease. We overinvest in Mercutio because he insures us against our own erotic eagerness for doom; he is in the play to some considerable purpose. So, in an even darker way, is the Nurse, who helps guarantee the final disaster. The Nurse and Mercutio, both of them audience favorites, are nevertheless bad news, in different but complementary ways. Shakespeare, at this point in his career, may have underestimated his burgeoning powers, because Mercutio and the Nurse go on seducing audiences, readers, directors, and critics. Their verbal exuberances make them forerunners of Touchstone and Jacques, rancid ironists, but also of the dangerously eloquent manipulative villains Iago and Edmund. Shakespeare’s greatness began with *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (1594–95, revised 1597) and *Richard II* (1595), superb achievements respectively in comedy and in history. Yet *Romeo and Juliet* (1595–96) has rightly overshadowed both, though I cannot quite place it for eminence with *A Midsummer Night’s Dream,* composed simultaneously with Shakespeare’s first serious tragedy. The permanent popularity, now of mythic intensity, of *Romeo and Juliet* is more than justified, since the play is the largest and most persuasive celebration of romantic love in Western literature. When I think of the play, without rereading and teaching it, or attending yet one more inadequate performance, I first remember neither the tragic outcome nor the gloriously vivid Mercutio and the Nurse. My mind goes directly to the vital center, act 2, scene 2, with its incandescent exchange between the lovers:

*Romeo* Lady, by yonder blessèd moon I swear, That tips with silver all these fruit-tree tops *Juliet* O swear not by the moon, th’ inconstant moon, That monthly changes in her circled orb, lest that thy love prove likewise variable.

*Romeo* What shall I swear by?

*Juliet* Do not swear at all, or if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self, which is the god of my idolatry, and I’ll believe thee.

*Romeo* If my heart’s dear love

*Juliet* Well, do not swear. Although I joy in thee, I have no joy of this contract tonight.It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden, too like the lightening, which doth cease to be ere one can say “It lightens.” Sweet, good night. This bud of love, by summer’s ripening breath, may prove a beauteous flower when next we meet. Good night, good night. As sweet repose and rest Come to thy heart as that within my breast.

*Romeo* O wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?

*Juliet* What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?

*Romeo* Th’ exchange of thy love’s faithful vow for mine.

*Juliet* I gave thee mine before thou didst request it, and yet I would it were to give again.

*Romeo* Wouldst thou withdraw it? For what purpose, love?

*Juliet* But to be frank and give it thee again and yet I wish but for the thing I have. My bounty is as boundless as the sea, my love as deep. The more I give to thee, the more I have, for both are infinite.

[2.2.107–35]

The revelation of Juliet’s nature here might be called an epiphany in the religion of love.Chaucer has nothing like this,nor does Dante, since his Beatrice’s love for him transcends sexuality. Unprecedented in literature (though presumably not in life), Juliet precisely does not transcend the human heroine.Whether Shakespeare reinvents the representation of a very young woman (she is not yet fourteen) in love, or perhaps does even more than that, is difficult to decide.How do you distance Juliet? You only shame yourself by bringing irony to a contemplation of her consciousness. William Hazlitt, spurred by a nostalgia for his own lost dreams of love, caught better than any other critic the exact temper of this scene:“He has founded the passion of the two lovers not in the pleasures they had experienced,but on all the pleasures they had *not* experienced.”It is the sense of an infinity yet to come that is evoked by Juliet, nor can we doubt that her bounty is “as boundless as the sea.” When Rosalind in *AsYou Like It* repeats this simile, it is in a tonality that subtly isolates Juliet’s difference:

*Rosalind* O coz, coz, coz,my pretty little coz, that thou didst know how many fathoms deep I am in love! But it cannot be sounded. My affection hath an unknown bottom, like the Bay of Portugal.

*Celia* Or rather bottomless, that as fast as you pouraffection in, it runs out.

*Rosalind* No.That same wicked bastard of Venus, that was begot of thought, conceived of spleen and born ofmadness, that blind rascally boy that abuses everyone’s eyes because his own are out, let him be judge how deep I am in love.

[4.1.195–205]

This is the sublimest of female wits, who one imagines would advise Romeo and Juliet to “die by attorney,” and who knows that women, as well as men, “have died from time to time and worms have eaten them,but not for love.”Romeo and Juliet, alas, are exceptions, and die for love rather than live for wit. Shakespeare allows nothing like Rosalind’s supreme intelligence to intrude upon Juliet’s authentic rapture. Mercutio, endlessly obscene, is not qualified to darken Juliet’s intimations of ecstasy. The play has already made clear how brief this happiness must be.

Against that context, against also all of his own ironic reservations, Shakespeare allows Juliet the most exalted declaration of romantic love in the language:

*Juliet* But to be frank and give it thee again; and yet I wish but for the thing I have.

My bounty is as boundless as the sea,

My love as deep: The more I give to thee

The more I have, for both are infinite.

[2.2.131–35]

We have to measure the rest of this play against these five lines, miraculous in their legitimate pride and poignance. They defy Dr. Johnson’s wry remark on Shakespeare’s rhetorical extravagances throughout the play:“his pathetick strains are always polluted with some unexpected depravations.” Molly Mahood, noting that there are at least 175 puns and allied wordplays in *Romeo* *and Juliet,* finds them appropriate to a riddling drama where “Death has long been Romeo’s rival and enjoys Juliet at the last,” an appropriate finale for doom-eager lovers. Yet little in the drama suggests that Romeo and Juliet are in love with death, as well as with each other. Shakespeare stands back from assigning blame, whether to the feuding older generation, or to the lovers, or to fate, time, chance, and the cosmological contraries. Julia Kristeva, rather too courageously not standing back, rushes in to discover “a discreet version of the Japanese *Realm of the Senses,*” a baroque sadomasochistic motion picture. Clearly Shakespeare took some risks in letting us judge this tragedy for ourselves,but that refusal to usurp his audience’s freedom allowed ultimately for the composition of the final high tragedies. I think that I speak for more than myself when I assert that the love shared by Romeo and Juliet is as healthy and normative a passion as Western literature affords us. It concludes in mutual suicide,but not because either of the lovers lusts for death, or mingles hatred with desire. Mercutio is the most notorious scene stealer in all of Shakespeare, and there is a tradition (reported by John Dryden) that Shakespeare declared he was obliged to kill off Mercutio, lest Mercutio kill Shakespeare and hence the play. Dr. Johnson rightly commended Mercutio for wit, gaiety, and courage; presumably the great critic chose to ignore that Mercutio also is obscene, heartless, and quarrelsome. Mercutio promises a grand comic role, and yet disturbs us also with his extraordinary rhapsody concerning Queen Mab, who at first seems to belong more to *A Midsummer* *Night’s Dream* than to *Romeo and Juliet:*

*Mercutio* O then I see Queen Mab hath been with you.

She is the fairies’ midwife, and she comes

In shape no bigger than an agate stone

On the forefinger of an alderman,

Drawn with a team of little atomies

Athwart men’s noses as they lie asleep –

Her wagon spokes made of long spinners’ legs;

The cover, of the wings of grasshoppers;

Her traces, of the smallest spider’s web,

Her collars, of the moonshine’s wat’ry beams;

Her whip, of cricket’s bone; the lash, of film;

Her wagoner, a small gray-coated gnat,

Not half so big as a round little worm

Pricked from the lazy finger of a maid;

Her chariot is an empty hazelnut,

Made by the joiner squirrel or old grub,

Time out o’ mine the fairies’ coachmakers.

And in this state she gallops night by night

Through lovers’ brains, and then they dream of love;

O’er courtiers’ knees, that dream on curtsies straight;

O’er lawyers’ fingers who straight dream on fees;

O’er ladies’ lips, who straight on kisses dream,

Which oft the angry Mab with blisters plagues

Because their breaths with sweetmeats tainted are.

Sometimes she gallops o’er a courtier’s nose,

And then dreams he of smelling out a suit;

And sometime comes she with a tithe pig’s tail

Tickling a parson’s nose as ’a lies asleep,

Then dreams he of another benefice.

Sometimes she driveth o’er a soldier’s neck

And then dreams he of cutting foreign throats,

Of breaches,ambuscadoes, Spanish blades,

Of healths five fathom deep; and then anon

Drums in his ear, at which he starts and wakes,

And being thus frighted swears a prayer or two

And sleeps again.This is that very Mab

That plats the manes of horses in the night

And bakes the elflocks in foul sluttish hair,

Which once untangled much misfortune bodes.

This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs,

That presses them and learns them first to bear,

Making them women of good carriage.

This is she –

[1.4.53–95]

Romeo interrupts, since clearly Mercutio never stops once started.This mercurial vision of Queen Mab—where “Queen” probably means a whore,and Mab refers to a Celtic fairy, who frequently manifests as a will-o’-the-wisp—is anything but out of character. Mercutio’s Mab is the midwife of our erotic dreams, aiding us to give birth to our deep fantasies, and she appears to posses a childlike charm for much of the length of Mercutio’s description. But since he is a major instance of what D.H.Lawrence was to call “sex-in-the-head,” Mercutio is setting us up for the

revelation of Mab as the nightmare, the incubus who impregnates maids. Romeo interrupts to say:“Thou talkst of nothing,” where “nothing” is another slang term for the vagina.Mercutio’s bawdy obsessiveness is splendidly employed by Shakespeare as a reduction of Romeo and Juliet’s honest exaltation of their passion. Directly before their first rendezvous,we hear Mercutio at his most obscenely exuberant pitch: If love be blind, love cannot hit the mark. Now will he sit under a medlar tree and wish his mistress were that kind of fruitAs maids call medlars when they laugh alone.

O Romeo, that she were,O that she were

An open arse, and thou a pop’rin pear!

[2.1.33–38]

Mercutio’s reference is to Rosaline, Romeo’s beloved before he falls, at first glance, in love with Juliet,who instantly reciprocates. The medlar, rotten with ripeness, popularly was believed to have the likeness of the female genitalia, and “to meddle” meant to perform sexual intercourse. Mercutio happily also cites a popular name for the medlar, the open arse, as well as the pop’rin pear,at once pop-her-in her open arse, and the slang name for a French pear, the Poperingle (named for a town near Ypres).This is the antithetical prelude to a scene that famously concludes with Juliet’s couplet:

Good night, good night. Parting is such sweet sorrow

That I shall say good night till it be morrow.

[2.2.185–186]

Mercutio at his best is a high-spiritual unbeliever in the religion

of love, reductive as he may be:

*Benvolio* Here comes Romeo, here comes Romeo!

*Mercutio* Without his roe, like a dried herring. O flesh, flesh,how art thou fishified! Now is he for the numbers that Petrarch flowed in. Laura, to his lady,was but a kitchen wench – marry, she had a better love to be rhyme her –Dido a dowdy, Cleopatra a gypsy, Helen and Hero hildings and harlots, Thisbe a gray eye or so, [. . .]

[2.4.34–40]

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

*Romeo* Courage, man, the hurt cannot be much.

*Mercutio* 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.

[3.1.91–95]

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 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 withTybalt 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 pop’rin 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,

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 holidam,

the pretty wretch left crying, and said “Ay.”

To see now how a jest shall come about.

I warrant, an 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.”

[1.3.16–48]

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 her late twin sister, 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:

*Juliet* 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 practice stratagems

Upon so soft a subject as myself.

What say’st thou? Hast thou not a word of joy?

Some comfort,Nurse.

*Nurse* Faith, here it is.

Romeo is banished, 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.

*Juliet* Speak’st thou from thy heart?

*Nurse* And from my soul too, else beshrew them both.

*Juliet* Amen.

*Nurse* What?

*Juliet* Well, thou hast comforted me marvelous much.

Go in, and tell my lady I am gone,

Having displeased my father, to Laurence cell,

To make confession and to be absolved.

*Nurse* Marry, I will, and this is wisely done.

exit

*Juliet* 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, counselor.

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.

[3.5.205–43]

The more-than-poignant:“that heaven should practice strategems/ 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 marvelous 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. 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 wryprayer: “Be fickle, Fortune.” Perhaps any playgoer or any reader remembers best Romeo and Juliet’s aubade after their single night of fulfillment:

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

It was the nightingale, and not the lark,

That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear.

Nightly she sings on yond pom’granate tree.

Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.

*Romeo* 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.

*Juliet* Yond light is not daylight, I know it, I.

It is some meteor that the sun exhales

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And light thee on thy way to Mantua.

Therefore stay yet, thou need’st not to be gone.

*Romeo* Let me be ta’en, let me be put to death.

I am content, so thou wilt have it so.

I’ll say yon gray 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.

*Juliet* It is, it is. Hie hence, be gone, 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 loathèd toad change eyes.

O now I would they had changed 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.

*Romeo* More light and light,more dark and dark our woes.

[3.5.1–36]

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 sophistian cates working through a stylized ritual. The courtly lover confront 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 atthe 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.