

LOVE AND HATE IN ROMEO AND JULIET

R.S. Smith

Romeo and Juliet is a tragedy of young love. The opening chorus explains that the lovers are "star-crossed"; their love is "death-marked"; and their destruction is "misadventured". They are foredoomed to an evil destiny. But their tragedy and their love are clearly and carefully set in a wider, social framework. For the Chorus begins by introducing the interrelated theme of their families' enmity and hate. The reason for their rivalry is not clearly defined; it is described merely as an "ancient grudge"; but there is a hint in the Chorus's opening words about the two households being "both alike in dignity". Neither family can bear to be outdone in wealth, importance, and precedence by the other. But their rivalry is a bitter and continual blood-feud, posing a constant threat of civil war. And apparently one of its worse bouts has just broken out afresh: the Chorus speaks of "new mutiny". The play sets out to show that the deaths of their children will prove to be the only means of putting an end to their parents' senseless strife. The deaths are thus a kind of sacrifice that redeems the parents' sin. The basic theme of the play is thus love's triumph over hate.

The play itself opens with the latest of these family quarrels. The servants of the Capulets begin it, though they

hesitate until they are sure of the support of Tybalt. Vicious and insolent, always on the lookout for a fight, they have the same mentality and lack of social conscience as our contemporary teddy-boys or surfies, or the street-corner mobs of leather-jacketed motorcyclists. It is important to realise that the general body of citizens are vigorously opposed to their disruption of the public peace. As this latest brawl gets under way, an officer calls on the citizens to put an end to it; "Strike, beat them down. Down with the Capulets, down with the Montagues!" This will be echoed later by the dying Mercutio, when he three times curses the warring families: "A plague on both your houses!" (3.1). The ruling prince is likewise deeply concerned to put an end to these recurrent brawls. He will not have the peace and quiet of his streets any further disturbed, and the penalty he imposes is death. The absurdity of the fray is shown up when old Capulet joins it in his dressing-gown, and wielding an old-fashioned two-handed sword that was a useless weapon against the modern rapiers of the younger men, sharply pointed for thrusting. Benvolio, too, tries to prevent the fray. Indeed his constant role is to act as peacemaker - his name means Goodwill. He plays the same part in the fateful duel between Tybalt and Mercutio in 3.1, when he urges them to withdraw from the public street and calmly discuss their grievances in private, or else separate altogether. He also acts as commentator, recounting the details of the brawls for the Montagues in 1.1 and for the Prince in 3.1; and he shows himself a very reliable and impartial witness.

The culprit is Tybalt, with his fiery temper and his ready sword. He is a born trouble-maker. We see this again in 1.5, at Capulet's ball. When he discovers Romeo among the guests, he at once sends his page for his rapier, and is all for striking Romeo dead on the spot. He imputes Romeo's presence to an absurdly scornful motive, and has to be bullied into submission by his uncle Capulet. But he regards Romeo as nothing less than a villain, and next morning sends him a

challenge - as we learn from Benvolio and Mercutio at the beginning of 2.4. "Villain" is the word with which he insults Romeo in 3.1, the same insult as Montague hurled at Capulet in 1.1. Romeo, having just married Tybalt's cousin Juliet, tries to keep the peace. It is only when he comes to blame himself for his friend Mercutio's ignominious death at Tybalt's hands, that he rounds upon him and slays him. Benvolio is at once concerned for Romeo's safety in view of the Prince's earlier threat of death, especially as the citizens too are again up in arms against this latest outrage. But Romeo is deeply conscious of the full significance of his fateful mistake, for his subsequent banishment is ultimately the cause of his own and Juliet's deaths: "This day's black fate on more days doth depend: This but begins the woe others must end". And when Romeo and Juliet are discovered lying dead in the tomb of the Capulets, it is the Prince who reappears to underline the inter-relation of the play's themes of love and hate. To the implacable enemies Capulet and Montague he says: "See what a scourge is laid upon your hate, That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love!" (5.3). And Capulet realises that the deaths of the young lovers are "Poor sacrifices of our enmity!" Peace is re-established at last, but at what an appalling cost!

The hate-theme is thus simple and straightforward. The love-theme is much more complex. The first aspect of it that we see in the play is bawdry. This physical side of love is introduced in the dialogue of Capulet's servants, Sampson and Gregory. Their smutty conversation represents the typical male attitude of sexual dominance, the woman being regarded as merely the means of gratifying the man's desire. There is clearly an element of sadism in this attitude; as Gregory says, "when I have fought with the men, I will be cruel with the maids: I will cut off their heads." Gregory replies: "The heads of the maids?" Sampson answers: "Aye, the heads of the maids, or their maidenheads; take it in

what sense thou wilt." Gregory quibbles: "They must take it in sense that feel it." And Sampson boasts: "Me they shall feel while I am able to stand." This sexual punning carries over into their preparations to fight the opposing servants of the Montagues: "Draw thy tool", says Gregory; and Sampson replies: "My naked weapon is out."

Such is the attitude towards love of the average man-in-the-street. The next attitude that the play presents is represented by Romeo's affair with Rosaline. This affair is a parody of the Petrarchan love-conventions that formed the basis of so many Elizabethan sonnets. Shakespeare shows these conventions as being productive of sentimental unreality. They are characterised by the complete dominance of the female over the male, the exact opposite of the outlook represented by Sampson and Gregory. Romeo is infatuated with Rosaline's beauty, but she does not respond to his passion. She holds aloof, scorning him from the cool heights of her chastity. He therefore mopes about in despair, going for solitary walks or shutting himself up in his room. He displays, in short, the unsociable and introspective moodiness generally supposed to be characteristic of the teenager. He expresses Rosaline's attitude in the conventional theme of many Elizabethan sonnet sequences, including Shakespeare's own. This theme is that by refusing her lover's advances, the disdainful lady wastes her beauty by not perpetuating it in having children. But Romeo is not genuinely in love with Rosaline: he is in love with the idea of being in love, and the attitude he expresses is pretty much a self-conscious pose. He is merely rehearsing the part conventionally expected of a moonstruck young lover. He gives himself away when, in the midst of his soulful ravings about his sorry state, he pauses to ask Benvolio: "Where shall we dine?" The pangs of adolescent hunger prove too much for the pangs of puppy-love. His love is unreal, conventional, sentimental - mere infatuation.

Yet another attitude to love is represented by Juliet's nurse, who is one of Shakespeare's great comic character creations. We first meet her in 1.3. She too believes that love is a matter of physical joys, but she has experienced it within the bounds of marriage. Perhaps she is to some extent a pathetically lonely woman, for she has lost both her own daughter Susan and her husband. She feels these losses because her daughter was the same age as Juliet, and because, like herself, her husband was "a merry man", a man who enjoyed life's fun. These losses of hers may go far towards explaining her later opportunism, when she advises Juliet to marry Paris because, since Romeo is banished, he can be no use to her as a husband. She thus represents the average woman's viewpoint that being married means having a man in your bed. But she is not merely the female counterpart of Sampson and Gregory, for in her outlook there is no suggestion of sadistic dominance. She simply likes to encourage young people to enjoy the physical side of marriage together while they can, for (unlike herself) they don't know what suffering and sorrows the future may hold. She heartily embraces sexuality as a means of rejoicing in life's physical pleasures. Her attitude is basically earthy and limited, but it is healthy. It does not include the lewd smirking of Sampson and Gregory. It simply indicates a candid and warm acceptance of the physical side of married life. It thus stands in strong contrast to the unreality of the conventional attitude of the Petrarchan lover's mistress, as we have already seen it illustrated in Rosaline, an attitude of cold and aloof disdain. This is the nurse's characteristic outlook: with her there is no behind-hand sniggering: she speaks openly and freely of natural and necessary sexual matters. She is quite ready to recall, with a laugh, how she weaned Juliet by rubbing bitter wormwood on her own nipple so that the child would refuse to suck. She recalls how, when Juliet fell over and hurt herself, she had a bump on her forehead "as big as a young cockerel's stone".

And it was a great joke when the nurse's husband told Juliet that one day she would be falling backwards to accommodate a man, and the innocent child stopped crying long enough to answer "Yes". And now that Juliet is old enough, the nurse's one wish is to see her happily married. She is ready to commend Paris because he is "such a man ... a man of wax", a model of what a husband should be. Lady Capulet urges her daughter to the match because by accepting Paris Juliet would lose nothing: "So shall you share all that he doth possess, By having him making yourself no less". The nurse chimes in: "No less! Nay, bigger women grow by men!" Her attitude clearly is that a wife's pregnancy is a natural matter for rejoicing. But it is a wife's pregnancy: she clearly regards the fulfilment of love as being marriage. She ends the scene by urging Juliet to make the most of Paris: "Go, girl, seek happy nights to happy days." But another sidelight on her attitude to marriage appears in her conversation with Romeo at the end of 1.5. She tells him that whoever marries Juliet will have the advantage of marrying money: "I tell you, he that can lay hold of her Shall have the chinks". Her formula for marriage thus seems to be a combination of material wealth and sensual pleasure. We next see her in 2.4, when we find her very properly protesting at Mercutio's bawdiness. He has just assured her that the time is already afternoon, "for the bawdy hand of the dial is now upon the prick of noon". She is rightly indignant at such a remark from a strange young man in a public place. "Out upon you! what (sort of) a man are you?" she asks. She herself is polite and courteous, and conscious of her dignity as an older woman: in taking his leave of her, Mercutio calls her "ancient lady". When he is gone, it is several minutes before she finishes expressing her resentment against his rudeness. She refers to him as a "saucy merchant" (i.e. an impudent fellow), and twice as a "scurvy knave" (i.e. a despicable ruffian), full of "ropery" (i.e. filthy talk). If he says anything against her, she'll

take him down a peg or two, or find someone else who will. She is no street-girl or easy pick-up, i.e. she is not the sort of woman that we can imagine such low types as Sampson and Gregory being interested in. She is so infuriated that she rounds upon her servant Peter, accusing him of standing idly by and allowing any ruffian to "use (her) at his pleasure", i.e. treat her as he pleases. But Peter is another Sampson or Gregory, and quibbles on her words in their typical style. He has seen "no man use (her) at his pleasure", i.e. enjoy sexual intercourse with her; "If I had, my weapon should quickly have been out. I warrant you I dare draw as soon as another man". Yet the Nurse's general treatment of Peter is another variation on the Petrarchan theme of the dominance of women over men: "My fan, Peter", "Before, and apace." But then the Nurse gets down to business with Romeo, and it is important to notice how she proceeds. Her sole and insistent concern is whether Romeo's love is honourable. With her characteristic and admirable candour, she tells him straight that if he merely intends to seduce Juliet, he is unworthy to be considered a gentleman. But once she is assured that he intends to marry the girl that same afternoon, she is completely satisfied, and is even reluctant (or makes a show of being so?) to accept the money that Romeo offers her for assisting with the arrangements. This episode entirely confirms the attitude to love that she established for us in the earlier scene. When she returns to Juliet with her good news, she is careful to assure her that Romeo is an honourable gentleman, courteous, kind, handsome, and virtuous. And she anticipates the delights of the young lovers' wedding-night in the same breath as she complains of the trouble of arranging them: "I am the drudge, and toil in your delight: But you shall bear the burden soon at night". For as we have seen, it is also characteristic of her to regard the mark of a true man as his sexual prowess. It is significant that when she finds Romeo in despair at being separated from Juliet, she rouses him by means of a sexual

quibble. She urges him to show his manhood by standing up and facing the situation squarely: "Stand up, stand up! Stand if you be a man; For Juliet's sake, for her sake rise and stand: Why should you fall into so deep an O?" (3.3). We should expect to hear her say: "fall into so deep a hole", and the idea of "hole", combined with the notion that the letter O is a circle, together give a clear indication of the carnality of the Nurse's suggestion. Yet her suggestion is a very practical consideration when we remember that at this point in the story the marriage of the young lovers has not been physically consummated. But the limitations of the nurse's preoccupation with the physical side of marriage are clearly defined in her last advice to Juliet (3.5). Threatened with an imminent marriage to Paris, Juliet has already been unsuccessful in appealing against it to her mother and father. When she finally turns to her nurse for comfort, Angelica shows no realisation that Juliet is inseparably wedded to Romeo by any ties other than those of the body. That husband and wife could be bound together by spiritual affinities is beyond her capacity to realise. She even goes so far as to overlook the fact that they have been formally joined together in holy matrimony by the Friar, with the result that Juliet's proposed marriage to Paris would be bigamous. Her sole concern is that since Romeo is banished, marriage with Paris will provide Juliet with a good-looking, well-built young bed-fellow. Small wonder that such opportunism completely alienates Juliet: "Go, counsellor! Thou and my bosom henceforth shall be twain".

In the earlier part of his play Shakespeare presents yet another attitude to love. This attitude is embodied in the character of Mercutio. It is the typical attitude of undergraduates. It is a gaily witty attitude, regarding sex as an intellectual game to be played with verbal cleverness. Notice that we never see or hear about Mercutio actually with a woman.

His conversation overflows with sexual innuendoes and witticisms, exercising his lively intellect in a playful verbal game on the subject of sex. Yet like Sampson, Gregory, Peter, and the Nurse, he too is limited to the physical aspect of love. He has no time for Romeo's dreamy drooling over Rosaline. He mocks Romeo's conventional pose of the dejected lover by telling him to soar above his moodiness by means of Cupid's wings. He tries to take Romeo out of himself by insisting that he come to the Capulets' dance. And when Romeo persists in being in the dumps, Mercutio tries to jest him into brighter spirits. When Romeo says, "Under love's heavy burden do I sink" (1.4), Mercutio tries to rally him by quibbling: "And, to sink in it, should you burden love - Too great oppression for a tender thing." This is precisely the same jest we later hear from the Nurse in her delighted anticipation of Romeo and Juliet's wedding-night. (And the same jest that forms the climactic conclusion of Mercutio's Queen Mab speech in this same scene. Queen Mab "is the hag, when maids lie on their backs, That presses them and learns them how to bear, Making them women of good carriage.") Romeo replies that love is not a tender thing, but rough and boisterous, "and it pricks like thorn." Mercutio's exuberant wit cannot resist the suggestive retort that if love gives you a rough time, you should cure it by means of intercourse: "Prick love for pricking, and you bear love down." And when even this fails to make Romeo sociable, Mercutio simply calls him a stick-in-the-mud and turns to leave him. But Romeo does go to the ball, where he meets and falls in love with Juliet. Afterwards, when the dancing is done, he cannot go home, but climbs the wall into the Capulets' garden. Benvolio sees him, and Mercutio calls to him to join them. But they still think that he is in love with Rosaline, and Mercutio, in high spirits after the dance, acts the fool by pretending to be a magican, summoning Romeo by means of magic spells. And before he is finished, in typical fashion he has got round to summoning Romeo by the charm of Rosaline's

"fine foot, straight leg, and quivering thigh, And the demesnes that there adjacent lie". Benvolio fears that this will anger Romeo, but Mercutio quips: "'Twould anger him To raise a spirit in his mistress' circle Of some strange nature, letting it there stand Till she had laid it and conjured it down", whereas "in his mistress' name I conjure only but to raise up him." When Romeo does not answer, Benvolio is ready to leave him behind in the dark, because this is the most appropriate place for his blind love. To which Mercutio again replies: "If love be blind, love cannot hit the mark", and goes on even more outrageously about medlars and a poperin pear. It is clear that where women are concerned, Mercutio's thoughts scarcely rise above the navel. When next he meets Romeo (2.4), Romeo has just come from arranging for Friar Lawrence to marry him that afternoon to Juliet. He feels on top of the world, with the result that his encounter with Mercutio develops into a sparkling wit-contest, in which Romeo shows himself more than a match for his friend. Mercutio calls on Benvolio to intervene in their duel of words, for he feels himself being bested; but Romeo calls on him to keep the contest going or he will claim the victory. Mercutio is overjoyed to see that Romeo is restored to his old sociable self, and his exuberance sets him off on his favourite topic again: "this drivelling love is like a great natural (i.e. fool) that runs lolling up and down to hide his bauble in a hole." Benvolio calls on him to stop, but Mercutio quips: "Thou desirest me to stop in my tale, against the hair?" And Benvolio, carried away by Mercutio's sheer high-spirited gusto, quips back: "Thou wouldst else have made thy tale large". But Mercutio has the last word: "O, thou art deceived! I would have made it short, for I was come to the whole depth of my tale, and meant indeed to occupy the argument no longer." It is to be noted that Romeo takes no part in this bawdy exchange, and that his own wit-contest with Mercutio is entirely free of bawdy. But Mercutio's masterpiece

of witty obscenity is still to come. It is his final flourish before he goes. This is his song about "An old hare hoar", i.e. about a bawdy old whore, who provides fleshly enjoyment but is not worth paying for because she grows old and mouldy before she is worn out. This is the last we hear of Mercutio's wit, for the next time we see him he is killed by Tybalt in the fateful duel in 3.1. But it is clear that his attitude to love is on the same level as that of other characters we have examined: it never rises above the physical.

There is one more lover of whom we must say something, and that is Paris. His love for Juliet is rather like the hate-theme in that it forms another framework within which the love-theme of Romeo and Juliet is worked out. We first meet Paris in 1.2, where Capulet is talking to him about the blood-feud, and saying that he thinks it shouldn't be hard for such old men as he and Montague to keep the peace as the Prince has commanded. Paris agrees that it is a pity they have lived at odds for so long. But he then immediately turns the conversation to his wish to marry Juliet. Capulet merely repeats what he has said before on this subject: that Juliet is his only child, that she is not yet fourteen, and that she is inexperienced in the ways of the world. Paris had better wait a couple more years, but meantime he is free to court Juliet and try to win her consent. We presume that Paris is the "knight" whom Romeo sees dancing with Juliet when he first arrives at the ball (1.5). When the Nurse first comes to Romeo, she tells him of Paris's interest in Juliet (2.4). In 3.4 Paris is with Capulet again, telling him that courtship must be held in abeyance during the period of family mourning for Tybalt's death. But Capulet suddenly takes it into his head to reverse his earlier attitude. He will not only actively promote Paris's courtship, but decides that Juliet shall marry him in three days' time. And when Juliet refuses, in the next scene, he bullies and browbeats her, and finally issues an ultimatum: either she marries Paris, or he

will turn her out of house and home. Next day he is so pleased with Juliet's professed submission that he advances the wedding another day (4.2): "Send for the County: go tell him of this. I'll have this knot knit up tomorrow morning". When Paris sees Juliet apparently dead (4.5), his thought is only of himself: death has deprived him of the joys he had anticipated. In the final scene, he arrives at Juliet's tomb with flowers, and acts the conventional idea of the bereaved lover: he will bring flowers and weep there every night. When Romeo's arrival interrupts him, he attempts to apprehend Romeo as the criminal responsible for Tybalt's murder. There is a cool, correct formality, mixed with self-pity and self-righteousness, that renders Paris a much less sympathetic character than his rival Romeo. There is no doubt that in its own limited way, his love for Juliet is genuine: its very persistence is a guarantee of that; and of course he does not know that Romeo is already Juliet's husband; but his love is obviously paler than Romeo's: it is of the kind that would hardly sweep a woman off her feet. Romeo does not arrive at Juliet's tomb with the conventional flowers and tears; he brings a mattock and a crowbar, for nothing must stand between him and his purpose to join his wife, as he thinks, in death. He has no desire to kill Paris, but must do so when Paris persists in being a troublesome obstacle to Romeo's transcendent purpose. Yet recalling Paris's love for Juliet, he generously and nobly fulfils his dying request to be laid in the tomb with her.

We come to realise, then, that Shakespeare's purpose in presenting not only the hate-theme but also these various other attitudes to love, is to suggest their inadequacy in comparison to the love of Romeo and Juliet. What he is suggesting, I think, is the difference between maturity and immaturity. The family blood-feud is not only senseless, it is absurd. Based as it is on the code of so-called "honour", it is sinful ("Thou shalt not kill"), un-Christian ("an eye

for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"), and puerile. It is puerile because rational adults ought not to engage in childist squabbles. Silly pride has usurped the place of mature wisdom. And the same is true of the various attitudes to love, which all basically never get past the stage of adolescent crudity and adolescent sniggering about the mere physical aspect of sex. No matter what the chronological ages of the persons concerned, such attitudes are immature. And Paris's love is likewise immature in its unadventurous acceptance of the conventional formalities, i.e. in its tameness. What sets the love of Romeo and Juliet apart, and makes of it one of the great stories of all time, is the rich fullness of the romantic experience it enshrines. Their love is physical, and full of romantic adventure - it is not every new husband who, like Romeo, climbs to his wife's bedroom on a rope-ladder. But it is also psychical, it involves their whole personalities, and this is why it is expressed in some of our finest lyric poetry. It is the rich totality of their experience that urges them to accord it the fullest expression within the socially acceptable bounds of marriage. Other people's so-called love is limited to sexuality; Romeo and Juliet's love is a total sharing of both body and spirit. It is this total sharing of the positive quality of love, expressed in marriage, that is infinitely more mature than the negative, destructive, disintegrating force of hate.