The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies

Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Othello, and *King Lear*

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"Beyond Comedy" - Required

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To my Swarthmore students,
who have inspired, collaborated,
and criticized in Shakespeare classes and
seminars for more than a decade:
this is their book.

[2]

Beyond Comedy:

Romeo and Juliet and *Othello*

Both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* use the world of romantic comedy as a point of departure, though in different ways. In the early play a well-developed comic movement is diverted into tragedy by mischance. The change of direction is more or less imposed on the young lovers, who therefore impress us primarily as victims. Othello and Desdemona are victims too, in one sense, but in their tragedy destruction comes from within as well, and comedy is one means by which Shakespeare probes more deeply into his characters and their love. He gives us in the early scenes a brief but complete comic structure and then develops his tragedy of love by exploiting the points of strain and paradox within the system of comic assumptions that informs that structure.

That these two plays are Shakespeare's only ventures into the Italianate tragedy of love and intrigue is no coincidence. The very features that distinguish this subgenre from the more dominant fall-of-the-mighty strain move it closer to comedy: its sources are typically novelle rather than well-known histories, its heroes are of lesser rank, its situations are private rather than public, its main motive force is love. Madeleine Doran, whose designation and description I follow for this kind of tragedy, has pointed out its affinity with comedy: "We are in the region where tragedy and comedy are cut out of the same cloth."[1] The

[1] *Endeavors of Art*, p. 137; Italianate intrigue tragedy is discussed on pp. 128–142. Doran includes under this heading the revenge tragedies *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*; but these touch only peripherally on sexual love, and as she notes, they also "cross the lines of the other big class, the tragedy of power" (p. 131). On the other side, Leo Salingar distinguishes the four *comedies* based on novelle—*Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado*, *All's Well*, and *Measure for Measure*—as verging on the tragic in somberness of mood and seriousness of issue, though not in structure; see *Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 301-305.

source tales of *Romeo* and *Othello*[2] would, I think, suggest quite readily to Shakespeare the possibility of using comic convention as a springboard for tragedy.

The movement of *Romeo and Juliet* is unlike that of any other Shakespearean tragedy. It becomes, rather than is, tragic. Other tragedies have reversals, but here the reversal is so complete as to constitute a change of genre. Action and characters begin in the familiar comic mold and are then transformed, or discarded, to compose the shape of tragedy.[3] In this discussion I shall have to disregard much of the play's richness, especially of language and characterization, in order to isolate that shaping movement. But isolating it can reveal a good deal about *Romeo*, and may suggest why this early experimental tragedy has seemed to many to fall short of full tragic effect.

[2] Arthur Brooke's *Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* (1562) recounts a story that appears also in the novella collections of Bandello and Painter; another such collection, Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi* (1565), provided the source for *Othello*.

[3] Various critics have commented on the comic thrust of the early acts of *Romeo*, with interpretations ranging from H. A. Mason's somewhat lame and impotent conclusion, "Shakespeare decided that in a general way the play needed as much comedy as he could get in" (*Shakespeare's Tragedies of Love* [London, 1970], p. 29), to Harry Levin's well-argued contention that the play invokes the artifices of romantic comedy in order to transcend them ("Form and Formality in *Romeo and Juliet*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 11 [1960], 3–11). Levin's essay is illuminating on the play's style; he does not speculate on what the transcendence-of-artifice theme (admittedly already used by Shakespeare in a comedy, *Love's Labour's Lost*) has to do with tragic structure. Franklin Dickey deals at some length with *Romeo* as "comical tragedy" in *Not Wisely But Too Well*, pp. 63-88. But Dickey's treatment of comedy is nonorganic, dwelling on such features as the witty heroine, the motif of lovers' absurdity, the debate on love's nature, the elaborate patterning of language, and the *commedia dell'arte* type-characters. He does not deal with why Shakespeare would want to present a tragic story this way or how the large comic element shapes the play as a whole. To explain the presence of that element, Dickey invokes the conventional association of love with comedy. J. M. Nosworthy thinks the comic admixture a mistake and blames it on Shakespeare's immaturity, as well as on the influence of Porter's *Two Angry Women of Abington*. "The Two Angry Families of Verona," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 3 (1952), 219-226.

It was H. B. Charlton, concurring in this judgment, who classed the play as "experimental." According to Charlton, Shakespeare in his early history-based tragic plays failed to find a pattern of event and character that would make the dramatic outcome feel inevitable; in *Romeo* he took a whole new direction, that of the modern fiction-based tragedy advocated by the Italian critic Giraldi Cinthio.[4] Certainly dramatic thrust and necessity are unsolved problems in *Titus Andronicus* and *Richard III*, and perhaps in *Richard II* too. But one need not turn to Italian critical theory to explain the new direction of *Romeo*. Given the novella-source, full of marriageable young people and domestic concerns, it seems natural enough that Shakespeare would think of turning his own successful work in romantic comedy to account in his apprenticeship as a tragedian.

We have seen that comedy is based on a principle of "evitability." It endorses opportunistic shifts and realistic accommodations as means to new social health. It renders impotent the imperatives of time and law, either stretching them to suit the favored characters' needs or simply brushing them aside. In the tragic world, which is governed by inevitability and which finds its highest value in personal integrity, these imperatives have full force. Unlike the extrinsic, alterable laws of comedy, law in tragedy is inherent—in the protagonist's own nature and in the larger patterns, divine, natural, and social, with which that personal nature brings him into conflict. Tragic law cannot be altered, and tragic time cannot be suspended. The events of tragedy acquire urgency in their uniqueness and irrevocability: they will never happen again, and one by one they move the hero closer to the end of his own personal time.

Comedy is organized like a game. The ascendancy goes to the clever ones who can take advantage of sudden openings, contrive strategies, and adapt flexibly to an unexpected move from the other side. But luck and instinct win games as well as skill, and I have discussed in the preceding chapter the natural law of comedy that crowns lovers, whether clever or not, with final success. Romeo and Juliet, young and in love and defiant of obstacles, are attuned to the basic movement of the comic game toward marriage and social regeneration. But they do not win:

[4] Charlton, "*Romeo and Juliet*" *as an Experimental Tragedy*, British Academy Shakespeare Lecture, 1939 (London, 1940), pp. 8–12.

the game turns into a sacrifice, and the favored lovers become victims of time and law. We can better understand this shift by looking at the two distinct worlds of the play and at some secondary characters who help to define them.

If we divide the play at Mercutio's death, the death that generates all those that follow, it becomes apparent that the play's movement up to this point is essentially comic. With the usual intrigues and go-betweens, the lovers overcome obstacles and unite in marriage. Their personal action is set in a broader social context, so that the marriage promises not only private satisfaction but renewed social unity:

> For this alliance may so happy prove
> To turn your households' rancour to pure love.
> (II.iii.91-92)

The households' rancor is set out in the play's first scene. This Verona of the Montague-Capulet feud is exactly the typical starting point of a comedy described by Frye—"a society controlled by habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law and the older characters."[5] The scene's formal balletic structure, a series of matched representatives of the warring families entering neatly on cue, conveys the inflexibility of this society, the arbitrary barriers that limit freedom of action.

The feud itself seems more a matter of mechanical reflex than of deeply felt hatred. Charlton noted the comic tone of its presentation in this part of the play.[6] The "parents' rage" that sounded so ominous in the prologue becomes in representation an irascible humour: two old men claw at each other, only to be dragged back by their wives and scolded by their prince. Charlton found the play flawed by this failure to plant the seeds of tragedy; but the treatment of the feud makes good sense if Shakespeare is playing on *comic* expectations. At this point, the feud functions in *Romeo* very much as the various legal restraints do in Shakespearean comedy. Imposed from outside on the youthful lovers, who feel themselves no part of it, the feud is a barrier placed arbitrarily between them, like the Athenian law giving fathers the disposition of their daughters which stands be-

[5] *Anatomy*, p. 169. Although the younger generation participate in the feud, they have not created it; it is a habit bequeathed to them by their elders.

[6] *Experimental Tragedy*, pp. 36–40.

tween Lysander and Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—something set up in order to be broken down.

Other aspects of this initial world of *Romeo* suggest comedy as well. Its characters are the gentry and servants familiar in romantic comedies, and they are preoccupied, not with wars and the fate of kingdoms, but with arranging marriages and managing the kitchen. More important, it is a world of possibilities, with Capulet's feast represented to more than one young man as a field of choice. "Hear all, all see," says Capulet to Paris, "And like her most whose merit most shall be" (I.ii.30-31). "Go thither," Benvolio tells Romeo, who is disconsolate over Rosaline, "and with unattainted eye / Compare her face with some that I shall show" (85-86) and she will be forgotten for some more approachable lady. Romeo rejects the words, of course, but in action he soon displays a classic comic adaptability, switching from the impossible love to the possible.

Violence and disaster are not totally absent from this milieu, but they are unrealized threats. The feast again provides a kind of comic emblem, when Tybalt's proposed violence is rendered harmless by Capulet's festive accommodation.

> Therefore be patient, take no note of him;
> It is my will; the which if thou respect,
> Show a fair presence and put off these frowns,
> An ill-beseeming semblance for a feast.
>
> (I.v.69-72)

This overruling of Tybalt is significant because Tybalt in his inflexibility is a potentially tragic character, indeed the only one in the first part of the play. If we recognize in him an irascible humour type, an alazon, we should also recognize that the tragic hero is an alazon transposed.[7] Tybalt alone takes the feud really seriously. It is his *inner* law, the propeller of his fiery nature. His natural frame of reference is the heroic one of honor and death:

> What, dares the slave
> Come hither, cover'd with an antic face,

[7] Maynard Mack, "Engagement and Detachment in Shakespeare's Plays," in *Essays on Shakespeare and Elizabethan Drama in Honor of Hardin Craig*, ed. Richard Hosley (Columbia, Mo., 1962), pp. 287-291.

> To fleer and scorn at our solemnity?
> Now, by the stock and honour of my kin,
> To strike him dead I hold it not a sin.
>
> (I.v.53-57)

Tybalt's single set of absolutes cuts him off from a whole range of speech and action available to the other young men of the play: lyric love, witty fooling, friendly conversation. Ironically, his imperatives come to dominate the play's world only when he himself departs from it. While he is alive, Tybalt is an alien.

In a similar way, the passing fears of calamity voiced at times by Romeo, Juliet, and Friar Laurence are not allowed to dominate the atmosphere of the early acts. The love of Romeo and Juliet is already imaged as a flash of light swallowed by darkness, an image invoking inexorable natural law; but it is also expressed as a sea venture, which suggests luck and skill set against natural hazards and chance seized joyously as an opportunity for action. "Direct my sail," says Romeo to his captain Fortune. Soon he feels himself in command:

> I am no pilot; yet, wert thou as far
> As that vast shore wash'd with the farthest sea,
> I should adventure for such merchandise.[8]

The spirit is Bassanio's as he adventures for Portia, a Jason voyaging in quest of the Golden Fleece (*MV* I.i.167-172). Romeo is ready for difficulties with a traditional lovers' stratagem, one which Shakespeare had used before in *Two Gentlemen*: a rope ladder, "cords made like a tackled stair; / Which to the high top-gallant of my joy / Must be my convoy in the secret night" (II.iv.183-185).

But before Romeo can mount his tackled stair, Mercutio's death intervenes to cut off this world of exhilarating venture. Shakespeare developed this character, who in the source is little more than a name and a cold hand, into the very incarnation of comic atmosphere. Mercutio is the clown of romantic comedy, recast in more elegant mold but equally ready to take off from the plot in verbal play and to challenge idealistic love with his own brand of comic earthiness.

[8] I.iv.113; II.ii.82-84. Later Mercutio hails the lovers' go-between, the Nurse, with "A sail, a sail!" (II.iv.98).

Nay, I'll conjure too.
Romeo! humours! madman! passion! lover!
Appear thou in the likeness of a sigh;
Speak but one rhyme and I am satisfied;
Cry but 'Ay me!' pronounce but 'love' and 'dove';
. . . . . .
I conjure thee by Rosaline's bright eyes,
By her high forehead and her scarlet lip,
By her fine foot, straight leg, and quivering thigh,
And the demesnes that there adjacent lie.
(II.i.6-20)

He is the best of game-players, endlessly inventive and full of quick moves and countermoves. Speech for him is a constant exercise in multiple possibilities: puns abound, roles are taken up at whim (that of conjuror, for instance, in the passage just quoted), and his Queen Mab brings dreams not only to lovers like Romeo but to courtiers, lawyers, parsons, soldiers, maids. These have nothing to do with the case at hand, which is Romeo's premonition of trouble, but Mercutio is not bound by events. They serve him merely as convenient launching pads for his flights of wit. When all this vitality, which has till now ignored all urgencies, is cut off abruptly by Tybalt's sword, it must come as a shock to a spectator unfamiliar with the play. In Mercutio's sudden, violent end, Shakespeare makes the birth of tragedy coincide exactly with the symbolic death of comedy. The alternative view, the element of freedom and play, dies with Mercutio. Where many courses were open before, now there seems only one. Romeo sees at once that an irreversible process has begun:

This day's black fate on moe days doth depend [hang over];
This but begins the woe others must end.
(III.i.116-117)

It is the first sign in the play's dialogue pointing unambiguously to tragic necessity. Romeo's future is now determined: he *must* kill Tybalt, he *must* run away, he is Fortune's fool.

This helplessness is the most striking feature of the second, tragic world of *Romeo*. The temper of this new world is largely a function of onrushing events. Under pressure of events, the feud turns from farce to fate; tit for tat becomes blood for blood. Lawless as it seems to Prince Escalus, the feud is dramatically "the law" in *Romeo*. Before, it was external and avoidable. Now it moves inside Romeo to be his personal law. This is why he takes over Tybalt's rhetoric of honor and death:

Alive in triumph and Mercutio slain!
Away to heaven respective lenity,
And fire-ey'd fury be my conduct now!
Now, Tybalt, take the 'villain' back again
That late thou gav'st me.
(III.i.119-123)

Even outside the main chain of vengeance, the world is suddenly full of imperatives. Others besides Romeo feel helpless. Against his will Friar John is detained at the monastery; against his will the Apothecary sells poison to Romeo. Urgency becomes the norm. Nights run into mornings, and the characters seem never to sleep. The new world finds its emblem not in the aborted attack but in the aborted feast. As Tybalt's violence was out of tune with the Capulet festivities in Act II, so in the changed world of Acts III and IV the projected wedding of Juliet and Paris is made grotesque when Shakespeare insistently links it with death.[9] Preparations for the wedding feast parallel those made for the party in the play's first part, so as to make more wrenching the contrast when Capulet must order,

All things that we ordained festival
Turn from their office to black funeral:
Our instruments to melancholy bells,
Our wedding cheer to a sad burial feast,
Our solemn hymns to sullen dirges change.
(IV.v.84-88)

The play's last scene shows how completely the comic movement has been reversed. It is inherent in that movement, as we have seen, that the young get their way at the expense of the old. The final tableau of comedy features young couples joined

[9] III.vi.23-28; III.v.201-202; IV.i.6-8, 77-85, 107-108, IV.v.35-39.

in love; parents and authority figures are there, if at all, to ratify with more or less good grace what has been accomplished against their wills. But here, the stage is strikingly full of elders—the Friar, the Prince, Capulet, Lady Capulet, Montague. Their power is not passed on. Indeed, there are no young to take over. If Benvolio survives somewhere offstage, we have long since forgotten this adjunct character. Romeo, Juliet, Tybalt, Mercutio, and Paris are all dead. In effect, the entire younger generation has been wiped out.

I have been treating these two worlds as separate, consistent wholes in order to bring out their opposition, but I do not wish to deny dramatic unity to *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare was writing one play, not two; and in spite of the clearly marked turning point we are aware of premonitions of disaster before the death of Mercutio, and hopes for avoiding it continue until near the end of the play. Our full perception of the world-shift that converts Romeo and Juliet from instinctive winners into sacrificial victims thus comes gradually. In this connection the careers of two secondary characters, Friar Laurence and the Nurse, are instructive.

In being and action, these two belong to the comic vision. Friar Laurence is one of the tribe of manipulators, whose job it is to transform or otherwise get round seemingly intractable realities. If his herbs and potions are less spectacular than the paraphernalia of Friar Bacon or John a Kent, he nevertheless belongs to their brotherhood. Such figures abound in romantic comedy, as we have seen, but not in tragedy, where the future is not so manipulable. The Friar's aims are those implicit in the play's comic movement: an inviolable union for Romeo and Juliet and an end to the families' feud.

The Nurse's goal is less lofty but equally appropriate to comedy. She wants Juliet married—to anyone. Her preoccupation with bedding and breeding reminds us of comedy's ancient roots in fertility rites, and it is as indiscriminate as the life force itself. But she conveys no sense of urgency in all this. On the contrary, her garrulity assumes the limitless time of comedy. In this sense her circumlocutions and digressions are analogous to Mercutio's witty games and, for that matter, to Friar Laurence's counsels of patience. "Wisely and slow," the Friar cautions Romeo; "they

stumble that run fast" (II.iii.94). The Nurse is not very wise, but she is slow. The leisurely time assumptions of both Friar and Nurse contrast with the lovers' impatience, to create first the normal counterpoint of comedy and later a radical split that points us, with the lovers, directly towards tragedy.

Friar Laurence and the Nurse have no place in the new world brought into being by Mercutio's death, the world of limited time, no effective choice, no escape. They define and sharpen the tragedy by their very failure to find a part in the dramatic progress, by their growing estrangement from the true springs of the action. "Be patient," is the Friar's advice to banished Romeo, "for the world is broad and wide" (III.iii.16). But the roominess he perceives in both time and space simply does not exist for Romeo. *His* time has been constricted into a chain of days working out a "black fate," and he sees no world outside the walls of Verona (17).

Comic adaptability again confronts tragic integrity when Juliet is forced to marry Paris—and turns to her Nurse for counsel, as Romeo has turned to Friar Laurence. In the Nurse's response comedy's traditional wisdom of accommodation is carried to an extreme. Romeo has been banished, and Paris is after all very presentable. In short, adjust to the new state of things.

> 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.
>
> (III.v.217-220)

She still speaks for the life force, against barrenness and death. Even if Juliet will not accept the dishclout comparison, an inferior husband is better than no husband at all: "Your first is dead, or 'twere as good he were / As living here and you no use of him" (225-226).

But her advice is irrelevant, even shocking, in this new context. There was no sense of jar when Benvolio, a spokesman for comic accommodation like the Nurse and the Friar, earlier advised Romeo to substitute a possible love for an impossible one. True, the Nurse here is urging Juliet to violate her marriage vows; but Romeo also felt himself sworn to Rosaline, and for

Juliet the marriage vow is a seal on the integrity of her love for Romeo, not a separable issue. The parallel points up the move into tragedy, for while Benvolio's advice sounded sensible in Act I and was in fact unintentionally carried out by Romeo, the course of action that the Nurse proposes in Act III is unthinkable to the audience as well as to Juliet. The memory of the lovers' passionate dawn parting that began this scene is too strong. Juliet and her nurse no longer speak the same language, and estrangement is inevitable. "Thou and my bosom henceforth shall be twain," Juliet vows when the Nurse has left the stage.[10] Like the slaying of Mercutio, Juliet's rejection of her old confidante has symbolic overtones. The possibilities of comedy have again been presented only to be discarded.

Both Romeo and Juliet have now cast off their comic companions and the alternative modes of being that they represented. But there is one last hope for comedy. If the lovers will not adjust to the situation, perhaps the situation can be adjusted to the lovers. This is the usual comic way with obstinately faithful pairs, and we have at hand the usual manipulator figure to arrange it.

The Friar's failure to bring off that solution is the final definition of the tragic world of *Romeo and Juliet*. There is no villain, only chance and bad timing. In comedy chance creates that elastic time that allows last-minute rescues. But here, events at Mantua and at the Capulet tomb will simply happen—by chance—in the wrong sequence. The Friar does his best: he makes more than one plan to avert catastrophe. The first, predictably, is patience and a broader field of action. Romeo must go to Mantua and wait

> till we can find a time
> To blaze your marriage, reconcile your friends,
> Beg pardon of the Prince, and call thee back . . .
> (III.iii.150–152)

[10] III.v.241. In the potion scene Juliet's resolve weakens for a moment, but almost immediately she rejects the idea of companionship. The momentary wavering only emphasizes her aloneness: "I'll call them back again to comfort me. / Nurse!—What should she do here? / My dismal scene I needs must act alone" (IV.iii.17-19).

It is a good enough plan, for life if not for drama, but it depends on "finding a time." As it turns out, events move too quickly for the Friar. The hasty preparations for Juliet's marriage to Paris leave no time for cooling tempers and reconciliations.

His second plan is an attempt to *gain* time: he will create the necessary freedom by faking Juliet's death. This is, of course, a familiar comic formula. Shakespeare's later uses of it are all in comedies.[11] Indeed, the contrived "deaths" of Hero in *Much Ado*, Helena in *All's Well*, Claudio in *Measure for Measure*, and Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* are more ambitiously intended than Juliet's, aimed at bringing about a change of heart in other characters.[12] Time may be important, as it is in *Winter's Tale*, but only as it promotes repentance. Friar Laurence, more desperate than his fellow manipulators, does not hope that Juliet's death will dissolve the Montague-Capulet feud, but only that it will give Romeo a chance to come and carry her off. Time and chance, which in the other plays cooperate benevolently with the forces of regeneration and renewal, work against Friar Laurence. Romeo's man is quicker with the bad news of Juliet's death than poor Friar John with the good news that the death is only a pretense. Romeo himself beats Friar Laurence to the tomb of the Capulets. The onrushing tragic action quite literally outstrips the slower steps of accommodation before our eyes. The Friar arrives too late to prevent one half of the tragic conclusion, and his essential estrangement from the play's world is only emphasized when he seeks to avert the other half by sending Juliet to a nunnery. This last alternative means little to the audience or to Juliet, who spares only a line to reject the possibility of adjustment and continuing life: "Go, get thee hence, for I will not away" (v.iii.160).

The Nurse and the Friar show that one way comedy can operate in a tragedy is by its irrelevance. Tragedy is tuned to the extraordinary. *Romeo and Juliet* locates this extraordinariness not so much in the two youthful lovers as in the love itself, its intensity

[11] Or in the comic part of a history, in the case of Falstaff's pretended death on the battlefield at Shrewsbury.

[12] The same effect, if not intention, is apparent in the reported death of Imogen in *Cymbeline*.

and integrity. As the play moves forward, our sense of this intensity and integrity is strengthened by the cumulative effect of the lovers' lyric encounters and the increasing urgency of events, but also by the growing irrelevance of the comic characters.

De Quincey saw in the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth* the resumption of normality after nightmare, "the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, [which] first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them."[13] I would say, rather, that the normal atmosphere of *Macbeth* has been and goes on being nightmarish, and that it is the knocking episode that turns out to be the contrasting parenthesis, but the notion of sharpened sensibility is important. As the presence of other paths makes us more conscious of the road we are in fact traveling, so the Nurse and the Friar make us more "profoundly sensible" of the love of Romeo and Juliet and its tragic direction.

The play offers another sort of experiment in mingled genres that is less successful, I think. It starts well, in IV.iv, with a striking juxtaposition of Capulet preparations for the wedding with Juliet's potion scene. On the one hand is the household group in a bustle over clothes, food, logs for the fire—the everyday necessaries and small change of life. On the other is Juliet's tense monologue of fear, madness, and death. It is fine dramatic counterpoint, and its effect is stronger in stage production, as Granville-Barker observed, when the curtained bed of Juliet is visible upstage during the cheerful domestic goings-on.[14] The counterpoint, of course, depends on the Capulets' ignorance of what is behind those curtains. It comes to an end when in scene v Nurse and the others find Juliet's body. But Shakespeare keeps the comic strain alive through the rest of the scene. The high-pitched, repetitive mourning of the Nurse, Paris, and the Capulets sounds more like Pyramus over the body of Thisbe than a serious tragic scene. Finally Peter has his comic turn with the musicians. What Shakespeare is attempting here is not counterpoint but the *fusion* of tragic and comic. It doesn't quite work. S. L. Bethell suggests that the mourners' rhetorical excesses direct the audience to remain detached and thus to reserve their tears for the real death scene that will shortly follow.[15] This makes good theatrical sense. It is also possible that the musicians' dialogue, modulating as it does from shock to professional shop to dinner, was meant to set off the tragic action by projecting a sense of the ongoing, normal life that is denied to Romeo and Juliet. Still, the scene tends to leave spectators uneasy—if, in fact, they get to see it at all: often the mourning passages are cut and the musicians' business dropped altogether.[16] Shakespeare's hand is uncertain in this early essay at fusing tragic and comic. Mastery was yet to come, first in the gravediggers' scene in *Hamlet* and then more fully in *King Lear*.

[13] "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*," in *Shakespeare Criticism: A Selection*, ed. D. Nichol Smith (Oxford, 1916), p. 378.

[14] *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (London, 1963), IV, 62-63.

The structural use of comic conventions does work. The result, however, is a particular kind of tragedy. Critics have often remarked, neutrally or with disapproval, that external fate rather than character is the principal determiner of the tragic ends of the young lovers. For the mature Shakespeare, tragedy involves both character and circumstances, a fatal interaction between man and moment. But in *Romeo and Juliet*, although the central characters have their weaknesses, their destruction does not really stem from those weaknesses. We may agree with Friar Laurence that Romeo is rash, but it is not rashness that propels him into the tragic chain of events. Just the opposite, it would seem. In the crucial duel between Mercutio and Tybalt, Romeo is trying to keep the combatants apart, to make peace. Ironically, this very intervention leads to Mercutio's death.

[15] *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition* (London and New York, 1944), p. 111. Charles B. Lower agrees and argues as well for the more doubtful proposition that the audience needs to be reassured that Juliet is really still alive. Lower convincingly defends the authenticity of a Ql stage direction, "*All at once cry out and wring their hand[s]*," which, by requiring the laments of Lady Capulet, the Nurse, Paris, and Capulet (IV.v.43-64) to be spoken simultaneously like an opera quartet, would increase the scene's burlesque quality. "*Romeo and Juliet*, IV.v: A Stage Direction and Purposeful Comedy," *Shakespeare Studies*, 8 (1975), 177-194.

[16] Granville-Barker wrote in 1930 that modern producers usually lowered the curtain after the climactic potion scene and raised it next on Romeo in Mantua, skipping the mourning and the musicians entirely. *Prefaces*, IV, 63-64. The most notable production of more recent years, by Franco Zeffirelli, omitted the musicians. J. Russell Brown, *Shakespeare's Plays in Performance* (London, 1966), p. 177.

Mer. Why the devil came you between us? I was hurt under your arm.
Rom. I thought all for the best.
(III.i.99-101)

If Shakespeare had wanted to implicate Romeo's rash, overemotional nature in his fate, he handled this scene with an ineptness difficult to credit. Judging from the resultant effect, what he wanted was something quite different: an ironic dissociation of character from the direction of events.

Perhaps this same purpose lies behind the elaborate development of comic elements in the early acts before the characters are pushed into the opposed conditions of tragedy. To stress milieu in this way is necessarily to downgrade the importance of individual temperament and motivation. At the crucial moment Romeo displays untypical prudence with the most upright of intentions—and brings disaster on himself and Juliet. In this unusual Shakespearean tragedy, it is not what you are that counts, but the world you live in.

Shakespeare may have been dissatisfied with his experiment. At any rate, he wrote no more tragedy for several years, and he never again returned to the comedy-into-tragedy structure. He came closest to it in *Othello*, where comic success precedes tragic catastrophe, but the effect is very different. Character and fate, dissociated in *Romeo and Juliet*, are completely intertwined in this mature tragedy of love. Once again a novella source, with its love motive and deception plot, seems to have prompted the dramatist to shape his material in ways that would remind his audience of comic conventions. But here external forces do not defeat the comic, as in *Romeo*; destruction comes from inside, both inside Othello and inside the assumptions of romantic love. *Othello* develops a tragic view of love by looking more penetratingly at some of those strains and contradictions I have pointed out within the comic convention, a tragic view adumbrated already in some of Shakespeare's lyric poetry. The personalities and situations of *Othello* are such as to put maximum pressure on those areas of thin ice, until the ice breaks and the treacherous currents below are released.

To see how this is so, we need to look in more detail at the conventional comic treatment of love outlined in the preceding chapter, and at Shakespeare's own romantic comedies of the decade and more before he wrote *Othello*. What is pertinent is not the explicit themes of these plays but their common underlying assumptions about love.

The *value* of love and of its proper fruition, marriage, is a basic premise of all Shakespeare's comedies, which invariably present as all or part of their initial situation individuals in a single and unsatisfied state and direct them through plot complications toward appropriate parings-off at the end. Unanimous approval extends from supernatural Oberon to bumpkin Costard; Jaques is the only significant dissenter, and even he is made to bless the Arden marriages (one of which he actively promoted: *AYL* III.iii) before bowing out of society to brood in his hermitage. Indeed, Jaques' election to live permanently in the forest has a certain irony, for his real adversary in this debate is nature itself.

We have observed that in comedy, law and conventional morality generally must give way before nature. The "winners" in comedy are those in tune with the natural forces of life-renewal. Shakespeare is explicit about the naturalness of mating in some comedies (*Love's Labour's Lost*, for example); the notion is implicit in all of them. Those that promote release and resolution of conflicts by moving the characters to some out-of-bounds locale—described for us spatially by Frye's "green world" and temporally by Barber's "holiday"[17]—give structural reinforcement to this sense of nature as love's ally. For all of the artificial and magical elements in the forests of *Two Gentlemen*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *As You Like It*, nature in those places is less trammeled and perverted than in the polite, treacherous court of Milan, or in Theseus's lawbound Athens, or in the dominions where Duke Frederick sets the ethical standard by crimes against his own kindred. Turned out or self-exiled from civilization, the lovers are righted and united in the woods.

Love is natural, then, as well as right. But comedy also affirms that love is irrational and arbitrary. "To say the truth," muses Bottom, "reason and love keep little company together now-a-days. The more the pity that some honest neighbours will not

[17] Frye, "The Argument of Comedy," *English Institute Essays 1948*; Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*.

make them friends" (*MND* III.i.131-133). He speaks for comedy in general, not just *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Oberon's potent flower can be seen as an emblem for the unreasonable passions of Titania, Lysander, and Demetrius, but also for those that immediately enslave Orlando to Rosalind (but not Celia), Oliver to Celia (but not Rosalind), Navarre and his friends to the Princess and *her* friends (with balletic tidiness), and, less fortunately, Phebe to Rosalind, Proteus to Silvia, Olivia to Viola-Cesario. If some of these sudden obsessions seem slightly less arbitrary than those of, say, Ariosto's characters as they veer from one course to another with each sip from the fountains of love and hate, it is only that Shakespeare has provided for his *final* couplings an acceptable degree of compatibility in sex, rank, and temperament. But there is no suggestion that this compatibility was reasonably appraised by the lovers or that it influenced their decisions—if they can be called that—at all.

This insistence that anything so vital as the love-choice is totally beyond rational control does not bother comic characters. Bottom is untroubled by his pronouncement, and by the fairy queen's amazing dotage that provokes it. Lovers generally abandon what reason they have without a struggle, and this course seems to be the approved one. When one of them attempts to rationalize his new emotions, as Lysander does when the misapplied love-juice compels him to love Helena, the result fools no one.

> *Lys.* Not Hermia but Helena I love:
> Who will not change a raven for a dove?
> The will of man is by his reason sway'd,
> And reason says you are the worthier maid.
> Things growing are not ripe until their season;
> So I, being young, till now ripe not to reason;
> And touching now the point of human skill,
> Reason becomes the marshal to my will,
> And leads me to your eyes . . .
> . . . . . .
> *Hel.* Wherefore was I to this keen mockery born?[18]

[18] *MND* II.ii.113-123. More reflective characters, like Helena in *All's Well* and Viola in *Twelfth Night*, recognize that they love against all reason, but still irrational emotion prevails over self-awareness. They go right on loving.

It is only in the security of comedy's natural law that we can dismiss with laughter Lysander's attempts to reconcile love with reason. Comedy provides no "honest neighbour" to make them truly friends.

The convention of ending comedies with marriage promised, or marriage celebrated, or marriage ratified emotionally and socially (*Taming of the Shrew*, *Merchant of Venice*, *All's Well*), has a further corollary. Comedies in this dominant pattern[19] by implication locate the important stresses and decisions of love in the courtship period. Their silence about shifts of direction after marriage suggests that there will be none, that once Jack has Jill, nought can go ill—or, if couples like Touchstone and Audrey seem headed for less than perfect harmony, at least that the "story" is over.

To sum up: Shakespeare's comic forms and conventions assume, first, the value of engagement with a mate, and second, the cooperation of forces beyond man, natural and otherwise, in achieving this mating and forestalling the consequences of human irrationality and malice, as well as plain bad luck. To call these "assumptions" does not, of course, mean that Shakespeare or his audiences accepted them as universally true. Rather, the dramatist's use of the comic formulas and the playgoers' familiarity with them directed which aspects of their diverse perception of experience should be brought forward—wish as well as belief—and which should be held in abeyance.

To the extent that Shakespeare allowed bad luck to defeat love in *Romeo and Juliet*, we may see him as questioning comic assumptions in that play, but the questioning does not go very deep. The lovers' relationship is presented as natural and right in itself. If it makes them irrationally impetuous, it is nevertheless not this rashness that precipitates the tragedy. In *Othello*, however, Shakespeare subjects the comic assumptions about the love union, nature, and reason to a radical reassessment, and in so doing exposes the roots of tragedy.

Just as such a scrutiny logically comes *after* the first unquestioning acceptance, so Othello's and Desdemona's story is deliberately set up as postcomic. Courtship and ratified marriage, the

[19] Only *Merry Wives* and *Comedy of Errors* depart from it to the extent of finding major plot material in postmarital strain as well as in courtship.

whole story of comedy, appear in *Othello* as a preliminary to tragedy. The play's action up until the reunion of Othello and Desdemona in Cyprus (II.i) is a perfect comic structure in miniature. The wooing that the two of them describe in the Venetian council scene (I.iii) has succeeded in spite of barriers of age, color, and condition of life; the machinations of villain and doltish rival have come to nothing; the blocking father has been overruled by the good duke; and nature has cooperated in the general movement with a storm that disperses the last external threat, the Turks, while preserving the favored lovers. Othello's reunion speech to Desdemona underlines this sense of a movement accomplished, a still point of happiness like the final scene of a comedy:

> If it were now to die,
> 'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear
> My soul hath her content so absolute
> That not another comfort like to this
> Succeeds in unknown fate.
>
> (II.i.187-191)

But at the same time that Othello celebrates his peak of joy so markedly, his invocations of death, fear, and unknown fate make us apprehensive about the postcomic future. Desdemona's equally negative mode of agreement ("The heavens forbid / But that our loves and comforts should increase . . .") indirectly reinforces this unease, and Iago's threat does so directly: "O, you are well tun'd now! / But I'll set down the pegs that make this music." In these few lines Shakespeare prepares us for tragedy, in part by announcing the end of comedy. The happy ending is completed, and Othello and Desdemona are left to go on from there.

If I am right to see the tragedy of *Othello* developing from a questioning of comic assumptions, then the initial comic movement ought to make us aware of unresolved tensions in this successful love. And it does, in various ways. Othello's account of their shy, story-telling courtship, however moving and beautiful, is in retrospect disturbing. "She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd; / And I lov'd her that she did pity them" (I.iii.167-168). Is it enough? Some critics have on this hint proclaimed the Moor totally self-centered, incapable of real love. This is surely too severe. Nevertheless, in his summary their love has a proxy quality. "The dangers I had pass'd" have served as a counter between them, a substitute for direct engagement or, at best, a preliminary to something not yet achieved. Twice before, Shakespeare had used comedy to explore the inadequacies of romantic courtship, cursorily in *Taming of the Shrew* and more thoroughly in *Much Ado*. In the latter play, Claudio and Hero move through the paces of conventional wooing, depending on rumors and go-betweens, without direct exploration of each other's nature. Thus, Hero can be traduced and Claudio can believe it, lacking as he does the knowledge of the heart that should counteract the false certainty of the eyes. *Much Ado* is a comedy, and thus the presiding deities give time for Dogberry's muddled detective work and provide in the Friar a benevolent countermanipulator against Don John. The love of Othello and Desdemona has the same vulnerability, but no time is given; and instead of Friar Francis, Iago is in charge.

Iago is the most obvious potential force for tragedy in the early part of the play. We see him thwarted in his first plot against Othello but already, at the end of Act I, planning the next. His speech at this point suggests in both overt statement and imagery the thrust beyond the comic, the germination out of the first failure of a deeper evil:

> I ha't—it is engender'd. Hell and night
> Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.
>
> (I.iii.397-398)

It was Bradley, expanding on suggestions from Hazlitt and Swinburne, who compared Iago in his first two soliloquies to a playwright in the early stages of writing a new play—"drawing at first only an outline, puzzled how to fix more than the main idea, and gradually seeing it develop and clarify as he works upon it or lets it work."[20] Bradley's parallel highlights the unexpected kinship between Iago and the magicians and friars of comedy, who arrange "fond pageants" in which other characters play unaware the parts assigned to them, and who dispose

[20] A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 2nd ed. (London, 1924), p. 231.

events toward the desired ending as a dramatist does. The implication that a single human being can control persons and change realities, exhilarating within the safe parameters of comedy, is sinister here.

So is the holiday from reason that comedy proclaims for romantic love. Iago is the most intelligent character in the play, and reason—or the appearance of reason—is his chief means of controlling others. The *power* of the rational view, in the comedies so easily dismissed with laughter or overruled by emotion, is grimly realized in Iago's accurate estimates of character

> The Moor is of a free and open nature
> That thinks men honest that but seem to be so;
> And will as tenderly be led by th' nose . . .
> (I.iii.393-395)

his telling arguments from experience

> In Venice they do let God see the pranks
> They dare not show their husbands . . .
> . . . . . .
> She did deceive her father, marrying you
> (III.iii.206-210)

his plausible hypotheses

> That Cassio loves her, I do well believe it;
> That she loves him, 'tis apt and of great credit
> (II.i.280-281)

and his final triumph in converting Othello to the philosophy of "ocular proof" (III.iii.364). Against him the love of Othello and Desdemona is vulnerable, rooted as it is not in rational evaluation of empirical knowledge but in instinctive sympathy. The same scene that underlines how indirect was their courtship (I.iii) also brings out the peculiar strength of their love that is a weakness as well:

> *Des.* I saw Othello's visage in his mind.
> (252)
> *Oth.* My life upon her faith!
> (294)

There is a core of power in this instinctive mutual recognition that survives Iago's rational poison and in a sense defeats it, but this victory comes only in death. In his posing of Iago against Othello and Desdemona, Shakespeare fully explores the conventional dichotomy between reason and love and uncovers its deeply tragic implications.[21]

If reason's opposition to love is traditional, nature in *Othello* appears to have changed sides. Love's ally is now love's enemy, partly because the angle of vision has changed: nature as instinctual rightness gives way to nature as abstract concept, susceptible like all concepts to distortion and misapplication. Brabantio, Iago, and finally Othello himself see the love between Othello and Desdemona as *un*natural—"nature erring from itself" (III.iii.231). But there is more to it than this. In key scenes of *Othello* a tension develops between two senses of *nature*, the general and the particular.

It is to general nature, the common experience and prejudice by which like calls only to like, that Brabantio appeals in the Venetian council scene. An attraction between the young white Venetian girl and the aging black foreigner, since it goes against this observed law of nature, could only have been "wrought" by unnatural means.

> She is abus'd, stol'n from me, and corrupted,
> By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks;
> For nature so preposterously to err,
> Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,
> Sans witchcraft could not.
> (I.iii.60-64)

The other sense of *nature* is particular and personal. What Iago means in his soliloquy at the end of this scene when he says the Moor "is of a free and open nature" is individual essence: the

[21] The irrationality of love in *Othello* has called forth some perceptive comment from critics, e.g., Winifred Nowottny, "Justice and Love in *Othello*," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 21 (1952), 330-344; and Robert B. Heilman, *Magic in the Web* (Lexington, Ky., 1956), esp. the discussion of "wit" versus "witchcraft," pp. 219-229. Terence Hawkes explores the same opposition in "Iago's Use of Reason," *Studies in Philology*, 58 (1961), 160-169, using the concepts of *ratio inferior* and *ratio superior*.

inscape of Othello. Brabantio tries to bring in this nature to support the other in his appeal against the marriage. He says that Desdemona is essentially timid, thus by nature (her own) cannot love the fearsome Moor.

> A maiden never bold,
> Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion
> Blush'd at herself; and she—in spite of nature,
> Of years, of country, credit, every thing—
> To fall in love with what she fear'd to look on!
> It is a judgment maim'd and most imperfect
> That will confess perfection so could err
> Against all rules of nature.
>
> (I.iii.94-101)

But this personal nature is the very ground of Desdemona's love. In her answer to her father and the Venetian Senate she tells how, penetrating through the blackness and strangeness, she saw Othello's true visage in his mind and subdued her heart to that essence, his "very quality."[22]

For Desdemona, then, nature as individual essence is not the enemy of love. But Iago has the last word in this scene, and his conclusion is ominous: Othello's very generosity and openness will make him take the appearance of honesty for the fact. That is, Othello will act instinctively according to the laws of his own nature rather than according to reasoned evaluation (which would perceive that most liars pretend to be telling the truth). This internal law of nature, then, implies the same vulnerability that we have seen in the instinctive, nonrational quality of Othello's and Desdemona's love.

Brabantio's general nature is implicitly reductive in that it derives rules for individuals from the behavior of the herd. Iago's is explicitly reductive. For him "the herd" is no metaphor, and the view he expounds to Roderigo has no place for human values or ethical norms. Natural law for Iago, as for Edmund in *King Lear*, is Hobbesian—a matter of animal appetites promoted by cleverness, with the strongest and the shrewdest winning out.[23]

[22] I.iii.250-252; Q1 has "utmost pleasure" for "very quality."

[23] See J. F. Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature* (London, 1949), pp. 31-43.

Desdemona, he assures Roderigo, will tire of Othello because the appetite requires fresh stimuli:

> Her eye must be fed; and what delight shall she have to look on the devil? When the blood is made dull with the act of sport, there should be—again to inflame it, and to give satiety a fresh appetite—loveliness in favour, sympathy in years, manners, and beauties—all which the Moor is defective in. Now for want of these requir'd conveniences, her delicate tenderness will find itself abus'd, begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor; very nature will instruct her in it, and compel her to some second choice.
>
> (II.i.221-233)

Compel her—here is yet another "law," generalized from the ways of animal nature. The context is wholly physical, as the persistent images of eating and disgorging keep reminding us. Iago has begun the discussion by prodding on the hesitant lover Roderigo with a bit of folk wisdom: "They say base men being in love have then a nobility in their natures more than is native to them" (212-214). But he does not pretend to believe it himself. Love is rather "a lust of the blood and a permission of the will"; Roderigo, in love or not, is a snipe; our natures are "blood and baseness."[24] In Iago's determined animalism there is another unexpected reminder of comedy, this time of the antiromantic servant or rustic whose imagination is bounded by the physical. It is perhaps because this view can be destructive when actually *acted out* against idealized love that the clowns of comedy are kept largely apart from the plot, as onlookers. Iago is a clown

[24] I.iii.333, 379, 327. E.A.J. Honigmann sees in Iago's soliloquy at the end of II.i another expression of his reductive generalizing. Since his plot against Othello depends on the universality of sexual appetite, he is lining up examples to prove a general "Law of Lust." That Cassio lusts for Desdemona is plausible; that Desdemona lusts for Cassio is not hard to believe; that Othello will go on lusting for Desdemona is likely; "and come to think of it, Iago continues, snatching another example out of the air, 'I do love her too!' (the unspoken thought being that this is reassuring, since it proves that the Law of Lust applies generally, therefore Desdemona and Cassio must 'love,' therefore Iago's plot will work)." *Shakespeare, Seven Tragedies: The Dramatist's Manipulation of Response* (New York, 1976), p. 87.

without good humor and (what underlies that lack) without self-sufficiency, who must therefore prove his theories on other people. Interestingly, this transfer of the debunking low-life perspective to the service of active malevolence seems to have left no function for the play's official clown. His feeble essays at bawdry and wordplay have nothing conceptual to adhere to, and after a second brief appearance in Act II he departs unmourned.

In Shakespeare's portrayal of Iago we can see a version of the clash I have been describing. In spite of his reductive general view, he can recognize the essential goodness of Othello ("free and open nature," "constant, loving, noble nature") as well as Desdemona's generosity and the daily beauty of Cassio's life.[25] Critics have complained of the inconsistency, and if *Othello* were naturalistic drama, they would be right to do so. But Iago is not just an envious spoiler; he is the symbolic enemy of love itself. The play's conception demands that the weapons of both "natures," like those of reason, be put in his hands.

In his great self-summation at the play's end, Othello says he was "wrought" from his true nature, and so he was. His own nature, noble and trusting, gave him an instinctive perception of Desdemona's, a perception which breaks forth at the sight of her even while Iago is poisoning his mind: "If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself! / I'll not believe it" (III.iii.282-283). But Iago is able to undermine that trust with false rationality, the insistence that Desdemona's honor, which is "an essence that's not seen," be made susceptible of ocular proof. He succeeds, where Brabantio failed, in using both conceptions of nature against Othello. The Moor's own generous nature, Iago suggests, makes him an easy dupe. "I would not have your free and noble nature / Out of self-bounty be abus'd; look to 't" (203-204). Taught to look from the outside instead of trust from the inside, Othello soon sees Desdemona's choice of him as an aberration, nature erring from itself. Iago quickly advances the other nature, the law of all things, to reinforce the idea:

> Ay, there's the point: as—to be bold with you—
> Not to affect many proposed matches
> Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,

[25] I.iii.393; II.i.283; II.iii.308-309; V.i.19-20.

> Whereto we see in all things nature tends—
> Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,
> Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural.
>
> (232-237)

And so Othello violates his own peculiar essence and internalizes Iago's law of the many. Desdemona soon realizes uneasily that he is altered ("My lord is not my lord": III.iv.125) and, in an ironic reflection of Othello's confusion, seeks the explanation in a generalization about "men": "Men's natures wrangle with inferior things, / Though great ones are their object" (145-146). Later the Venetian visitors gaze horrified at the change in that nature that passion could not shake, as Othello strikes his wife and then exits mumbling of goats and monkeys. He has taken into himself Iago's reductive view of man as animal. In the next scene (IV.ii) he will see Desdemona in terms of toads coupling and maggots quickening in rotten meat.

The love that in comedies was a strength in *Othello* is vulnerable to attacks of reason, arguments from nature. More than that: vulnerability is its very essence. Before falling in love with Desdemona, Othello was self-sufficient, master of himself and of the battlefield. After he believes her to be false, his occupation is gone. Why? Because love has created a dependency, a yielding of the separate, sufficient self to incorporation with another. What comedy treated as a liberating completeness becomes in *Othello* the heart of tragedy. Even in the play's comic phase there are signs of this new and potentially dangerous vulnerability. Othello's images for his love-commitment are not of expansion but of narrowing and confining:

> But that I love the gentle Desdemona,
> I would not my unhoused free condition
> Put into circumscription and confine
> For the seas' worth.
>
> (I.ii.25-28)

To love totally is to give up the freedom of self for the perils of union, and the expansive great world for an other-centered, contingent one. Othello makes a significant metaphor for Desdemona near the end of the play:

Nay, had she been true,
If heaven would make me *such another world*
Of one entire and perfect chrysolite,
I'd not have sold her for it.[26]

"My life upon her faith" is literally true. Desdemona has become Othello's world.[27]

It is in this light, I think, that we can best understand why Othello reacts to Iago's insinuations about Desdemona by renouncing his profession. The great aria on military life invokes, not chaos and carnage, but *order*. War is individual passion subordinated to a larger plan, martial harmony, formal pageantry, imitation of divine judgment.

O, now for ever
Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troops, and the big wars
That makes ambition virtue! O, farewell!
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, th' ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp, and circumstance, of glorious war!
And O ye mortal engines whose rude throats
Th' immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit,
Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone.
(III.iii.351-361)

Stylistically and rhythmically, the formal catalogues and ritual repetitions strengthen this selective picture of war as majestic order. Earlier in this scene Othello has said that when he stops loving Desdemona, chaos will come again. Now it has happened. With his world thrown into chaos, his ordering generalship is gone.

Othello's disintegration of self is the dark side of comedy's rejection of singleness, its insistence on completing oneself with another. But Shakespeare goes deeper in his exploration of comic assumptions by showing that the desired merging of self and other is in any case impossible. The more or less schematized pairings-off of the comedies combine necessary opposition (male/female) with sympathies in age, background, temperament.[28] It is enough in comedy to suggest compatibility by outward signs and look no farther than the formal union. But in *Othello* Shakespeare has taken pains in several ways to emphasize the separateness of his lovers.

[26] v.ii.146-149; my italics. The idea of Desdemona as a world also animates "I had rather be a toad, / And live upon the vapour of a dungeon, / Than keep a corner in the thing I love / For others' uses" (III.iii.274-277) and "Methinks it should be now [at Desdemona's death] a huge eclipse" (v.ii.102).

[27] Theodore Spencer relates some of these speeches through the similar notion that Othello has *given* his world to Desdemona. *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1961), pp. 129-130, 135.

Cinthio's Moor in the source tale is handsome, apparently fairly young, and a longtime Venetian resident. Apart from sex, his only real difference from Desdemona is one of color, and Cinthio does not dwell on it much. Shakespeare dwells on it a great deal. Black-white oppositions weave themselves continually into the verbal fabric of *Othello*. Indeed, the blackness of Cinthio's hero may have been one of the story's main attractions for Shakespeare. Certainly he altered other details of the story to reinforce this paradigmatic separation into black and white, to increase Othello's alienness and widen the gulf between his experience and Desdemona's. Shakespeare's Moor is a stranger to Venice and to civil life in general; his entire career, except for the brief period in which he courted Desdemona, has been spent in camp and on the battlefield (I.iii.83-87). Even Othello's speech reminds us constantly, if subtly, of his apartness. It is hardly rude, as he claims to the Venetian Senate, but it is certainly different from theirs. His idiom naturally invokes Anthropophagi and Pontic seas, roots itself in the exotic rather than the everyday social life that is familiar to the others but not to him. He knows as little of Venetian ways as Desdemona knows of "antres vast and deserts idle," and he is given no time to learn. While Cinthio's Moor and his bride live for some time in Venice after their marriage, Othello and Desdemona must go at once to Cyprus—and not even in the same ship. No wonder that, when Iago generalizes about the habits of his countrywomen ("In Venice they do let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands . . ."), Othello can only respond helplessly, "Dost

[28] See above, p. 43.

thou say so?" (III.iii.206-209). Shakespeare has deprived him of any common ground with Desdemona on which he can stand to fight back—not only to facilitate Iago's deception, but to heighten the tragic paradox of human love, individuals dependent on each other but unalterably separate and mysterious to one another in their separateness. The two great values of comic convention—love and the fuller self—are seen as tragically incompatible.

To sharpen the contrast, Othello is made middle-aged, thick-lipped—everything Desdemona is not. The image of black man and white girl in conjunction, so repellent to some critics that they had to invent a tawny or café-au-lait Moor, is at the center of the play's conception of disjunction in love. It gives visual focus to the other oppositions of war and peace, age and youth, man and woman. This disjunction serves the plot: it assists Iago's initial deception, and it provides most of the tension in the period between the deception and the murder, as Desdemona inopportunely pleads for Cassio, and Othello in turn can communicate his fears only indirectly, through insults and degradations. But beyond this plot function the disjunction constitutes a tragic vision of love itself.

What I am suggesting is that the action of *Othello* moves us not only as a chain of events involving particular people as initiators and victims, but also as an acting out of the tragic implications in any love relationship. Iago is an envious, insecure human being who functions as a perverted magician-manipulator, cunningly altering reality for Othello. But he is also the catalyst who activates destructive forces not of his own creation, forces present in the love itself.[29] His announcement of the "monstrous birth" quoted above (p. 75) has special significance in this regard. Coming at the end of a resolved marriage scene, it implies that the monster will be the product of the marriage. Iago says, "It is engender'd," not "I have engendered it," because he is not parent but midwife. "Hell and night," embodied in this demi-devil who works in the dark, will bring the monster forth, but it is the fruit of love itself.

[29] In arriving at this conclusion I have been influenced by Kenneth Burke's idea of the "agent/act ratio"; see especially his "*Othello*: An Essay to Illustrate a Method," *Hudson Review*, 4 (1951), 165-203, in which he shows how the characters of Othello, Desdemona, and Iago are determined by their roles in the play's central tension, which they actualize. My interpretation of that tension, however, differs from Burke's, which centers on love as exclusive ownership.

Because *Othello* is a play, and a great one, tragic action and tragic situation are fully fused in it, and it would be pointless to try to separate them. But a look at some of Shakespeare's nondramatic work may help clarify the paradoxical sense of love as both life and destruction that informs the events of this play. The sonnets present a range of attitudes to love, from joyous assurance to disgust and despair, but they return again and again to a certain kind of tension between lover and beloved. Sonnet 57 is one example.

> Being your slave, what should I do but tend
> Upon the hours and times of your desire?
> I have no precious time at all to spend,
> Nor services to do, till you require.
> Nor dare I chide the world-without-end hour,
> Whilst I, my sovereign, watch the clock for you,
> Nor think the bitterness of absence sour,
> When you have bid your servant once adieu;
> Nor dare I question with my jealous thought
> Where you may be, or your affairs suppose,
> But, like a sad slave, stay and think of nought
> Save where you are how happy you make those.
> So true a fool is love that in your will,
> Though you do anything, he thinks no ill.

This apparently positive statement belies its own assent to the terms of relationship by double-edged phrases like "no *precious* time" and "Nor *dare* I chide," and by the bitter wordplay of the couplet: "So true a fool" suggests the loyally loving innocent, but also "so absolutely a dupe." "Fool" completes the sonnet's identification of beloved as monarch and lover as slave. He is not just any kind of slave but the king's fool, a hanger-on who is valued for the occasional diversion he provides. The total effect is of a speaker pulled in contrary directions by need of his friend and esteem of himself.

In Sonnet 35, images and syntax convey the cost of commitment in love.

No more be griev'd at that which thou hast done:
Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud;
Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,
And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud.
All men make faults, and even I in this,
Authorizing thy trespass with compare,
Myself corrupting, salving thy amiss,
Excusing thy sins more than thy sins are;
For to thy sensual fault I bring in sense—
Thy adverse party is thy advocate—
And 'gainst myself a lawful plea commence;
Such civil war is in my love and hate
That I an accessary needs must be
To that sweet thief which sourly robs from me.

The poem strives to repair the damaged relationship by creating a new equality between lover and beloved. It does indeed achieve this, but only at the cost of the speaker's own integrity. He manages to absolve his friend of fault by natural comparisons, nature having no moral dimension to justify blame, and then implicates himself in fault for making those very comparisons—authorizing the trespass with compare. The last part of the sonnet strains against the first quatrain, and in that strain lies its impact. Can we accept the absolution given in lines 1-4 if the mode of absolution turns out to be sinful? The images reinforce this sense of disjunction: those of the first quatrain are drawn exclusively from the natural world, and those of the remainder come from the civilized world of moral man, especially the law courts. "Civil war," finally overt in line 12, is implicit earlier in the like-sounding antitheses that shape lines 7-10 into a series of tensions. The couplet, its message of inner division supported by the difficult twisting of the last line, completes the violation of self that love has required.

The same kind of violation, expressed with less anguish and more wry acceptance, is the theme of Sonnet 138:

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
I do believe her, though I know she lies. . . .

Here is a comic response to the problem of integrity compromised by dependence on another, as *Othello* is a tragic re-

sponse. In its mutual accommodation reached through lies and pretenses, Sonnet 138 also stresses the other side of the paradox, the necessary separateness of lovers. Even the more idealistic sonnets never proclaim complete union. And the most idealistic of all, Sonnet 116, presents quite an opposite picture, of love persisting on its own in spite of the beloved's infidelity:

Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
. . . . . .
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

This is selfless but ultimately single, more like God's love for man than like any human relationship. Edward Hubler saw in Sonnet 116 Shakespeare's affirmation of mutuality as the essence of love.[30] It seems to me just the contrary, a recognition that if love does depend on being requited it will be neither lasting nor true. It must necessarily bend with the remover, meet defection with defection.

Enduring mutuality does not seem to be a possibility in the sonnets. When Shakespeare does address himself to the merging of separate identities, the result is the rarefied allegory of "The Phoenix and Turtle." Here the impossibility is even clearer. The phoenix and the turtle dove are perfectly united, but they are dead. Most of the poem is a dirge sung at their funeral, and it ends in complete stasis—triplets with a single rhyme sound asserting that these lovers left no progeny, that what they represented is gone forever.

Leaving no posterity—
'Twas not their infirmity,
It was married chastity.

Truth may seem, but cannot be;
Beauty brag, but 'tis not she:
Truth and beauty buried be.

What do we make of this? It has been argued that "The Phoenix and Turtle" approaches "pure poetry" in being all vehicle with

[30] *The Sense of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Princeton, 1952), pp. 92-93.

no tenor. Certainly it is hard to relate these dead birds and their metaphysical-paradoxical union to the affairs of mortal men and women. Do phoenix and turtle die because annihilation is implicit in perfect union, or because their obliteration of distance, number, and individuality offends against natural law, or because such perfection is possible only outside of time? In any case, the poem makes it clear that the ideal will never again be realized on earth.

The dead-end quality of "The Phoenix and Turtle" illuminates tragic love in *Othello* in one way, as the sonnets' tensions and compromises do in another. The sonnets, indeed, provide the most succinct statement of the dilemma I have been exploring in *Othello*, in the opening lines of Sonnet 36:

> Let me confess that we two must be twain,
> Although our undivided loves are one.

In his comedies Shakespeare viewed the coming together of incomplete opposites from a certain intellectual distance. In *Othello* he struck a vein of tragedy by focusing on the contradiction within such a conception: denial of self-sufficiency combined with continued isolation in the self. The comic structure at the beginning of *Othello* does not, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, arouse comic expectations. The seeds of tragedy are already there, and Iago threatens in a way that Tybalt could not. Instead, the rather neat comic pattern, glossing over the vulnerabilities and ambiguities in Othello's and Desdemona's love and disposing too opportunely of the implacable forces represented by Iago, sets up a point of departure for what is to follow: the look beyond and beneath comedy.

In calling *Othello* a tragic statement about love in general I do not mean to deny the power and beauty of the relationship between Othello and Desdemona, which the play celebrates fully. The great worth of love is, after all, what makes its internal flaws so painful. Nor do I wish to turn this very human drama into an allegory. But I do suggest that the universal dimension, the wider reverberations that some critics have felt lacking in *Othello*,[31] emerge very clearly when the play is seen from this

[31] See Helen Gardner, "*Othello*: A Retrospect, 1900-67," *Shakespeare Survey*, 21 (1968), 1-3.

perspective. We have perhaps spent too much time asking the traditional questions about this play: Is Othello culpable in succumbing to Iago's suggestions? What makes Iago do what he does? These are important questions, but it is also important to look beyond the individual events of *Othello*, the defeat of a more or less noble dupe by an obscurely motivated villain, to the tragic inadequacies and contradictions of love itself.[32]

Shakespeare's two Italianate tragedies offer companion pictures of the vulnerability of love, threatened from without in *Romeo and Juliet*, from within in *Othello*. It is this concentration on vulnerable *love* that distinguishes these plays from two others where love comes to grief, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Both of the latter present their romantic principals with considerable comic distancing and deflation; that is, their emphasis is on the vulnerability of the *lovers*. *Troilus* is so dominated by the debunking vein, which affects the warriors as well as the lovers, that no sense of the heroic survives in it. Confusion over its genre began in Shakespeare's own time—the quarto title pages called it a history, the author of the 1609 preface praised it as a comedy, the First Folio editors apparently planned to place it among the tragedies—and continues in our own. *Antony*, however, is tragic in form and effect. If I had included it in this study,[33] its proper place would have been between *Hamlet* and

[32] After I had arrived at my conclusions on *Othello*, I came across a similar emphasis in John Middleton Murry's *Shakespeare* (London, 1936). For Middleton Murry, *Othello* expresses "the pain and anguish and despair which true lovers must inevitably inflict upon one another, because they are one, and because they are not one" (pp. 316-317). Iago is central to the tragedy not merely as intriguer but as the embodiment of love's inevitable flaw. This reinforcement of my sense of the play is welcome, especially since Middleton Murry's starting point was quite different from mine. He began with the handkerchief, and the paradoxical fact that Desdemona forgets to be concerned for it because she is concerned over Othello's sudden illness. That is, she loses the love token because she loves (pp. 313-316).

The case is the reverse with another study read after my own discussion was first published, Leslie Fiedler's *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (New York, 1972). In his chapter on *Othello* ("The Moor as Stranger," pp. 139-196), Fiedler notes two of my own starting points—the one-act comedy at the play's beginning and the use of Othello's blackness as a symbol of cultural apartness rather than of racial inferiority—but moves from them to conclusions very different from mine.

[33] See above, pp. 6-7.

King Lear. Antony, like Hamlet, suffers from his own largeness of spirit and consequent inability to narrow down, choose, discard alternatives. Like Lear, he exemplifies a special version of the heroic which must justify itself in the face of direct comic attack, of intimations of absurdity. But even this attack is adumbrated in *Hamlet*, which looks forward as well as back in its rich exploitation of comic means for tragic ends.