VENDETTA IN VERONA

A picture of vendetta in action provides a second prologue to the play in the first scene. Gregory is baiting a reluctant Sampson (both Capulet men, both ordinary citizens) into battle with any Montague men they might encounter. Typically, Shakespeare begins in the middle of a conversation (probably preceded in our minds by Gregory having challenged Sampson’s resolve, as in a dare). Their mode of speech is heroic sarcasm, or taunting over-familiarity. They begin with puns on “coal/collier/collar/choler,” “ay/aye/eye,” and “move” (meaning both “emote” and “transport”):

SAMPSON: Gregory, on my word, we’ll not carry coals.
GREGORY: No, for then we should be colliers.
SAMPSON: I mean, an we be in choler, we’ll draw.
GREGORY: Ay, while you live, draw your neck out of collar.
SAMPSON: I strike quickly, being moved.
GREGORY: But thou art not quickly moved to strike.

(1.1.1)

Sampson says he will “not carry coals,” a slang expression for “suffer insults,” as in submitting to do the dirty work for a boss (here, the Montagues). Gregory replies that they would “then” just be colliers, as if Sampson were literally expressing a desire not to transport coal to people’s homes, a lowly trade. Sampson protests this questioning of his bravery and answers that if they are angry, they will draw (i.e., their swords). Gregory then takes “drawing” for pulling back or withdrawing the neck from a hangman’s noose. Picking up on his “ay,” now meaning “yes,” Sampson says he will always strike quickly when moved or angry (“in choler,” or choleric). Gregory eggs him on by implying that Sampson always saves himself by rarely getting angry. Only with difficulty would he show so much life (i.e., quickness). Thus, Gregory finds himself baiting Sampson into haste to do battle with the Montagues.

This kind of interplay of short lines of dramatic dialogue has been called stichomythia (short lines in rows). The term was first used in the later fourth century B.C. when Aristotle wrote his praise of tragedy (The Poetics) as the highest form of poetry. Stichomythia
in a play suggests clipped dramatic speech in the form of call and answer, often reiterating some or all of the previous speaker's words. It also provides the soul of comedy and is there called repartee. But in tragedy it ominously implies a sequence of dares to a potentially violent opponent—as in "I dare you," (answer) "I double dare you," (answer) "I triple dare you"—that leads to escalating reciprocal violence in words, then to actual violence in baiting and egging each other on to dangerous acts, and then to death—as occurs among the ordinary citizens of two factions in the first scene of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Loosened up by rivalrous interplay, Gregory and Sampson discuss the possibility of drawing a symbolic sword in raping the enemies' most prized possession in all-out vendetta: their virgin women. Sampson brags, "When I have fought with the men, I will be civil with the maids—I will cut off their heads" (1.1.23). When Gregory asks in disbelief, "The heads of the maids?" Sampson answers, "Ay, the heads of the maids, or their maidenheads," or hymens. This is comic and bawdy repartee, but just as the witty give-and-take of the first balcony scene leads Romeo and Juliet quickly into the marriage bed and total longing, so this repartee leads to a spectacular bloodbath on the stage. The bloodletting does not stop until Tybalt kills Mercutio, Romeo kills Tybalt, Romeo kills Paris, Romeo kills himself, Juliet stabs herself to death, and Romeo's mother dies of grief.

If Romeo and Juliet are the focus of love in the play, Juliet's cousin Tybalt is the focus of rivalry and vendetta. What sets off Tybalt is not simply Romeo's crashing of the Capulet party but ultimately the threat to the virginity of his thirteen-year-old first cousin, Juliet. With the knowledge that comes from previous contact in deadly rivalry, he recognizes Romeo at the party by his voice from behind the mask—a voice sounding praises of Juliet's beauty in an overheard soliloquy. Romeo is speaking to himself and to the audience, "Did my heart love till now?" (1.5.53), but Tybalt overhears him.

Tybalt immediately says to his squire,

This, by his voice, should be a Montague.
Fetch me my rapier, boy.

True vendetta always includes an element of intimacy, especially the extreme intimacy of loathing. And hate has its own imagina-

tion, just as passionate love does. It is just as self-flagellating and dark as romantic passion. Here, for example, Tybalt sees Romeo as a threat to the "honor of my kin" (maintaining honor often goes with murder in Shakespeare). But he also needs to see Romeo as devilish in his supposed "fleering" (grimacing, or laughing unpleasingly; possibly a reference to his mask) and "scoring" of "our solemnity" (1.5.58). This is hardly the case with moonstruck Romeo, yet Tybalt is certain (just as a jealous lover is always sure in his or her wrong belief). It is, however, hardly believable to Tybalt's uncle, Capulet, who chides his nephew for trying to turn his party into a bloodbath.

Capulet says of Romeo,

'A bears him like a portly gentleman.

He shall be endured.

What, Goodman boy? I say he shall. Go to!

Am I the master here, or you? Go to. (1.5.67, 77-79)

Romeo is described as portly, probably because he carries himself with a good "port," or carriage, although the first actor to play the role of Romeo, the famous Richard Burbage (see Chapter 5), was a solid or portly man. Romeo is supposed to be pining away. "Goodman boy" is something of an oxymoron. "Goodman" suggests the head of a household, but a boy is just a boy. "Goodman" also has a slightly Puritan overtone as a means of address. And Puritans were often scapegoated on the Elizabethan stage, partly because although they were affluent they opposed on religious principle all plays and supposedly did not attend performances. "Goodman boy" and Capulet's later "saucy boy" (1.5.84) and "princox" (1.5.87) all seem fairly synonymous and mild insults designed to keep Tybalt in his place. Although they succeed in controlling him at the party, they make Tybalt more bloodthirsty on the hot streets of Verona. Insults foster rebellion. And no one is master of this intimate rivalry between houses—not the prince of a city-state where a wayward Friar acts out his fantasies of peace with the only children of major families; nor in the household of old man Capulet, where a much younger wife and mother gives way to a long-winded and bawdy nurse, and where a fairly modest party comes to resemble controlled chaos and near insurrection.

Paradoxically, it is the not-so-innocent bystanders who suffer
most from the vendetta in the Verona of *Romeo and Juliet*. Benvolio, related to the Montagues, stands by with sword in hand while almost all his friends are killed. Mercutio, kin to the Prince, delivers his most famous line in his dying moments: “a plague o’ both your houses” (3.1.90). Perhaps the most innocent bystander in the play is Paris, a relative of the Prince (like Mercutio) who is wooing Juliet, albeit unsuccessfully, from early in the play. Given the heated sex and violence in town, Paris is not only jeered contemptuously by Juliet at Friar Laurence’s cell but then is dispatched by unequaled swordsman Romeo, whom he has importuned at the tomb of the Capulets. Once vendetta starts to rule in Verona, everything spins out of control until even the bystanders fall. “Oh, I am slain” in Paris’s penultimate line is one of the most difficult to deliver in Shakespeare, because it might provoke—and has provoked in performance—grim laughter in the audience. Perhaps the best delivery of this line is to swallow the words in a groan of frustration.

**CONTRARIETY IN *ROMEO AND JULIET***

The notion that to understand the universe one must simultaneously contemplate contraries goes back at least as far as the words of Heraclitus, the pre-Socratic philosopher of the sixth century B.C. who spoke of a harmony of opposites, or of discords, or of a discord of harmonies, as being at the center of the cosmic plan. Heraclitus’ pagan philosophy and its descendants in neoplatonism influenced many Christian thinkers during the Renaissance, including many powerful leaders and many great intellectuals (e.g., Erasmus, Cornelius Agrippa, Castiglione, Paracelsus, Copernicus, Giordano Bruno, Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, and Shakespeare).

*Romeo and Juliet* presents contraries in the action of (1) sex and violence, and (2) delay and rush, or stasis and excessive speed. It also presents individual paradoxes, such as the simultaneous good and bad of love and sex or of heroism and savagery. Contrariety appears in the paradoxes of oxymorons and other forms of self-contradiction among the principal characters. But it also informs larger issues that are uncovered when one does a double reading of the play: one, as a story of innocent young lovers; two, as a story of thrill-seeking quasi-genocides; one, as a story of an
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