At the end of the poem a touch of Southern petulance screens the grave import of what he is doing—namely, setting up two Churches in opposition to one another.

I am Arnaut who piles up the wind, who courses hares with a bullock; I swim against the tide!

It will be recalled that when Arnaut Daniel appears in the Purgatorio, he utters his name to Dante, his disciple, in a verse of purest Provençal:

Ieu suis Arnaut, que plor e vau cantan. . . .

URBAN VENDETTA

Urban vendetta and gang warfare over "territorial rights" and collective action by crowds on the streets have to some degree plagued every city known to humankind. Shakespeare himself got to witness enough civil disturbance in Elizabethan London to justify his use of it as a central theme in many of his plays (notably Henry VI, Part Three; Romeo and Juliet; Julius Caesar; Troilus and Cressida; and Coriolanus). Modern culture often associates gang warfare and family face-offs with the Great Smoky Mountains region or beyond, but we know such activity is actually close to home. Even the terms "lynch," "lynch mob," and "feud" seem to come from a rural South, although in fact lynching and feuds of various sorts are encountered on city streets in Houston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. Feuds are ominously present in institutions and, of course, in every school play yard.

Today, for complex reasons, Italy—and especially Sicily—has provided many of the terms commonly used to describe the kind of urban civil disorder that escalates into destruction of all parties. Vendetta ("feuding"), cosa nostra ("family thing"), padrone ("master," "godfather"), capo ("head man"), and, to a lesser degree, la mano nera ("the black hand"—the instrument of reprisal) all come from Sicily. This is a remote—and island—extension of Europe, supposedly unpoliced or barely policed like Shakespeare's streets of Verona.

Does the use of these foreign terms in English suggest racial and national bias? It may be comforting to stigmatize a common problem by placing its evil securely in a distant culture or a racial minority. Such use of language hints at prejudice that might have been entirely foreign to Shakespeare but present in subsequent criticism and interpretation of Romeo and Juliet. How else might Leonard Bernstein's musical, West Side Story, place Shakespeare's feud among Verona's finest families—"alike in dignity" in their grand public squares—in poverty-stricken Hispanic neighborhoods on the west side of New York? How else might Baz Luhrmann place his 1996 movie version of Romeo and Juliet in a fictional Verona Beach (portrayed as a rough area of urban Southern California) rife with ethnic gang and mafia drug activity?
Interpreters of *Romeo and Juliet* have often looked for a reason behind the feud between the Montagues and Capulets. Sometimes the Capulets are presented as nouveau riche and the Montagues old aristocratic, but there is no textual support for such a distinction. Shakespeare merely presents two very rich and powerful (and powerfully similar) families in a mysterious feud that is beginning to wane, but dangerously so. For example, Capulet is lenient about "enemy" party crashers but nearly produces a bloodbath in the process. Shakespeare's text even fails to support the popular color-coding of the retainers of the two houses to reflect the historical—initially medieval—Italian feud between Ghibellines (the "whites," aristocratic supporters of the Holy Roman Emperor) and Guelphs (the "blacks," popular supporters of the Pope). Shakespeare is emphatically and peculiarly quiet on this point, but his vagueness may have a purpose. After all, Italy and England (especially Sicily and England) at the time could both be regarded as improperly policed islands on the edge of Europe, reflecting powerful similarities. Shakespeare might have had such feelings about Sicily.

Sicily and England of Shakespeare's day had a lot in common. They were both made representative kingdoms at about the same time following Norman invasions. They had identical treasury systems, probably of Sicilian origin. Bonds were created through intermarriage of royalty and extended visits between rulers and dignitaries. For example, Richard the Lion-Hearted and Thomas a Beckett, archbishop of Canterbury, visited Sicily, and expatriates such as Walter of England, archbishop of Palermo, spent time there. In Shakespeare's day, after Venetian liberties were curbed, the English and Sicilians were proud to boast the only effective constitutional parliaments in the world; both were peculiar in that they ruled (or barely ruled) under two monarchs at war, Queen Elizabeth and Philip II of Spain. Perhaps Europe allowed considerable liberty to the two largest islands set off from the continent by the Strait of Messina and the English Channel, but one of the products of that freedom was the licence of civil disturbance that kind Shakespeare presents in Verona. Nonetheless, such insurrections were probable given human nature in general, not geographic location.

In other words, if Shakespeare remains quiet on why the Capulets and Montagues feud, he may have had special reason for doing so. Feuds, like fits of jealousy, often have no good reason—they thrive on trivial irritations like imagined insults (as with Tybalt) and lost handkerchiefs (as with Othello). They grow into serious conflicts most quickly among likes, twins, similar races, or families, and they follow alike among aristocratic and middle-class and poverty-stricken families. They often resolve themselves, tragically, only when there is a colossal sacrifice, a real or imagined collective murder on everyone's part, such as the human sacrifice of Romeo and Juliet implied at the end of Shakespeare's play. Nowhere is their death at their own hands seen as the mortal Christian sin of suicide, but as a ritual human sacrifice.

If such collective human destruction is not unanimous there will still be bad blood, but if the blood is on everyone's hands (Montague and Capulet, Prince and family alike), the conflagration will be contained. All this inevitable feuding and scapegoating in the play suggests a depressing view of human nature. Shakespeare knew that Romeo and Juliet were perfect candidates for sacrifice. After all, not only were they the highly visible and only living children of two feuding houses, but they represented a distinctive blend of Capulet and Montague given their secret marriage. They represented the kind of mix or contamination that would threaten and enrage a stubborn adherent of one family's faction, like Tybalt.

Although there were Italy-haters in Elizabethan England (such as the Queen's own tutor, Roger Ascham), it is apparent that Shakespeare saw Italy as a superior civilization. Perhaps he even noted that the Italians had a refreshing way of exposing and analyzing their urban problems. The Italians always loved to tell and retell, even in Verdi's operatic form, the story of civil disturbance that gets out of hand. Similarly, Shakespeare often tells the story of the mob violence that sometimes plagues England's relative political freedom.

**GAY TALESE'S NOVEL *UNTO THE SONS***

Journalist and novelist Gay Talese, of Calabrian Italian descent, writes about Palermo's most famous eruption of feuding, which may have helped found the mafia for which the city is (perhaps unfairly) world famous. It also set in motion the war of the whites
(Ghibellines) and the blacks (Guelphs) that Shakespeare chose to ignore in favor of his ahistorical study of human nature in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Recalling how Saint Francis of Paola—a fifteenth-century mystic—supposedly flew over the seas by a magic carpet from the toe of Italy to Sicily over the Strait of Messina, Talese writes the following, a section of *Unto the Sons* known as "the Sicilian Vespers."

**FROM GAY TALESE, *UNT0 THE SONS***


Brother of the devout King Louis IX of France (later canonized as Saint Louis), Charles d'Anjou came to Italy with pious credentials, which are exemplified in the large heroic painting of him that my father as a boy saw hanging in the Maida church where the Talese family worshipped. In the portrait, Charles is presented as a benign figure, almost enshrined in heavenly sunlight, being blessed by the Pope. According to my father, however, Charles d'Anjou's thirteenth-century invasion and conquest of Frederick II's dominions in southern Italy and Sicily was—quite apart from Charles's building many splendid churches that pacified the pacy—more accurately characterized by the activities of his soldiers, who burned the crops of farmers, extorted money from men whom they later murdered, and abducted and raped women.

Several years of such behavior finally led to a people's rebellion, an eruption of such magnitude that it culminated in the death of two thousand French soldiers of occupation and quickly diminished the size and influence of Charles d'Anjou's dynasty in the Kingdom of Southern Italy.

The spark of the insurrection was ignited in Sicily during a quiet afternoon in a park on the outskirts of Palermo. The year was 1282. It was Easter Monday, a sultry day on which many Sicilian men, women, and children wore holiday clothes and strolled or relaxed on the grass surrounded by baskets filled with fruit, cheese, and wine.

French soldiers were also in the park, patrolling the area in pairs, and they would occasionally join the picnickers without being invited and help themselves to the wine and make personal comments that, while embarrassing to the women, the Sicilian men tried to ignore.

But as the drinking continued and the soldiers' remarks became more bold and crude, some Sicilians began to express their resentment. When two men stood up to address the soldiers more directly, a drunken French officer appeared on the scene and ordered his soldiers to search the men to determine whether they carried knives or other dangerous objects. When nothing was discovered, the officer demanded that the search be extended to include the women in the area; as this was being done, the officer saw walking along a path a beautiful young woman, accompanied by the man she had married earlier that morning.

Pointing to the woman, the officer announced that he would search her himself, and as her husband was held back by soldiers, the officer proceeded to move his hands up under her skirts and then into her blouse, where he fondled her breasts, causing her to faint. Her anguish husband was provoked to yell out to the crowd: "Death to all the French!"

Suddenly from behind trees and bushes came Sicilians armed with knives which they thrust into the backs of the officer and his soldiers. After confiscating the dead Frenchmen's weapons, they formed a mob armed mostly with knives, sticks, and stones, and rushed out of the park in a rampagous spirit exacerbated as they were joined by hundreds of other Sicilians who were eager to attack and kill every Frenchman they could find.

By sheer numbers they overwhelmed the French garrisons on the island, killing not only soldiers but also French women and children—anyone who was French faced the likelihood of a brutal death. The method the mob used to identify the French occupants of Sicily was to force them at knifepoint to pronounce one word: *cićeri*. This is the name for a small vegetable, a beige bean about the size of a pea, and its proper pronunciation (chi-che-ri) was so beyond the mastery of the French tongue that its mere mispronunciation provided the mob with ample evidence for a throat-slashing death sentence. When news of this massacre reached Charles d'Anjou, who was then traveling near Rome, he immediately dispatched one hundred thirty armed ships toward Sicily, while he himself led the charge of five thousand cavalry officers down the coast through the Maida valley toward the seething southernmost tip of Italy.

But before Charles d'Anjou could fight his way across the Strait of Messina to reconquer Sicily, the rebels had gained the support of the Spanish king, Peter of Aragon, who sailed with ten thousand soldiers from his African campaign against the Moors toward the western shore of Sicily. From there he crossed the island and contributed to the destruction of the French cavalry and fleet.

In addition to King Peter's army, many of the noble families of Sicily and southern Italy supported the cause of the mob, which had meanwhile organized itself into secret groups led by underground chieftains who, according to my father, were the first "godfathers" of the Mafia.
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