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THE FEUD IN *ROMEO AND JULIET*: A DIAGNOSIS AS DISEASED BODY POLITIC AND METATHEATRICAL DRAMATIZATION*

LUISA CONTI CAMAIORA

The importance of the feud in *Romeo and Juliet* has always been recognized¹. Here attention will be focused first on its function and operation as external manifestation and embodiment of a disease in the body politic², and then as metatheatrical illustration of certain assertions in the Prologue.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* furnishes the following definition of “body politic”, indicated as a specific meaning: “the nation in its corporate character; the state. (Orig. there appears to have been, in this use of *body*, a reference to the *headship* of the sovereign.)”³. This was a current and generalized concept during Elizabethan times and Shakespeare was extremely sensitive to the way in which a sound leadership of the state, in other words, a strong and authoritative sovereign, was the sign of a healthy nation. This conceit went hand in hand with the idea that the macrocosm of the state was constituted and determined by various political and social microcosms that concurred in its composition.

The relevance and importance of these elements is emphasized in the very opening of *Romeo and Juliet*, in the Prologue sonnet of the Chorus. In the first four verses the

* A part of this article was presented on 26th May 2010 among other contributions during a day in honour of Professor Anna Anzi, Chair Professor of the History of the English Theatre in the State University of Milan.

¹ See H.B. Charlton, *From Shakesperian Tragedy*, in *William Shakespeare: The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, With New and Updated Critical Essays and a Revised Bibliography*, J.A. Bryant ed., Signet Classics, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1998 [1964], pp. 147, 151-153; S. Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies: Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1959, pp. 57-69, and her *Ideology and Feud in Romeo and Juliet*, “Shakespeare Survey”, XLIX, 1996, pp. 87-96; C. Watts, *Twayne's New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet*, Twayne Publishers, Boston 1991, p. 19; A. Leggatt, *Shakespeare's Tragedies: Violation and Identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/New York 2005, pp. 38-39. See in particular C. Kahn, *Coming of Age in Verona*, “Modern Language Studies”, VIII, 1978, pp. 171-193, that focuses on the feud as “the primary tragic force in the play – not the feud as agent of fate, but the feud as an extreme and peculiar expression of patriarchal society” (p. 171).

² This study is indebted to D.M. Bergeron's article, *Sickness in Romeo and Juliet*, “College Language Association Journal”, XX, 1977, pp. 356-364, for the idea of a metaphorical sickness in the body politic, but Bergeron is more concerned with the analysis of the imagery of illness as central to the tragic structure of the play.

³ The definitions in this study are all taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition, CD-ROM (v. 4.0), Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009. The *Dictionary* also provides an illustrative example of the use of the expression, citing Act 24, *Henry VIII*, xii, 1532-3: “This Realm of England is an Empire ... governed by one supreme Head and King ... unto whom a Body politick, compact of all Sorts and Degrees of people ... been bounde and owen to bear a natural and humble Obedience”.

audience is told how

Two households both alike in dignity
 (In fair Verona, where we lay our scene)
 From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
 Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean. (Prologue, verses 1-4)⁴.

What is worthy of note is that these opening words of the tragedy refer, not to the titular protagonists of the play, but to the feud, mentioning a series of elements that appear extremely relevant. Without going so far as Janette Dillon, who asserts that “the only villain in *Romeo and Juliet* is the feud”⁵, it is possible to agree with her that the feud and romantic love are the two most serious matters in the play⁶. In his Prologue Shakespeare places in the foreground an aspect that was marginal in the various re-tellings of the Romeo and Juliet story in Bandello, Painter and Brooke, where, as H.B. Charlton has remarked, “their only political significance was an adventitious role in the civic disturbance of a small city-state”⁷. On the contrary, as Frederick S. Boas has sustained, in *Romeo and Juliet*, “the political plot does not merely form the background to the main action, but it is one of its integral elements. The rivalry of the Montagues and the Capulets gives a tragic bias to what would otherwise be the story of a youthful love”⁸. In fact, it may be sustained that Shakespeare chose the story of Romeo and Juliet for dramatic treatment not only for its love story but also for its socio-political contents. A further point is that the Prologue asserts that the love of Romeo and Juliet is not so much doomed *per se*, but in the specific circumstances of the context of Verona, namely, the feud situation.

It must be remembered that among the plays that Shakespeare composed prior to *Romeo and Juliet* were the histories, *Henry VI, Parts One, Two and Three* and *Richard III*, chronologically collocated in the period known as the War of the Roses (1455-1485), years of national feud between the House[hold]s of Lancaster and York for the succession of the English throne. Verona, the city-state of the play, may be interpreted as a microcosm reflecting the macrocosm that is England, and its contending factions, the Montagues and the Capulets, “both alike in dignity”, may be perceived as the analogies, in the reduced dimension of the Italian city, of the warring houses of Lancaster and York in the English nation. As Northrop Frye observes: “Verona is torn apart in the Montague-Capulet feud, and although there is an order-figure in the Prince, he dominates the action only fitfully”⁹. Perhaps it is not without significance that Juliet, reflecting on the “name”

⁴ The edition used for the quotations is *Romeo and Juliet, The Arden Shakespeare*, B. Gibbons ed., Thomson Learning, London 2006 [1980].

⁵ J. Dillon, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Tragedies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/New York 2006, p. 45.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁷ H.B. Charlton, *Shakespearian Tragedy*, p. 146.

⁸ F.S. Boas, *On Political Elements in Romeo and Juliet*, in *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet: Bloom's Notes*, Harold Bloom ed., Chelsea House Publishers, Broomall, PA 1996, p. 38.

⁹ N. Frye, *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto/Buffalo/

of Romeo as that of the “enemy”, should ask herself: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet” (II. ii. 43-44). The specific choice of the “rose” among the wide range of other possible flowers, may be taken as indication of Shakespeare’s intention to maintain the civil conflict of the past in the mind of his audience. That the conflict in Verona, like the War of the Roses, is a civil war, is emphasized by the repetition, “civil blood... civil hands”, where there is an allusion to the shedding of blood by fellow countrymen that intestinal warfare involves.

With regard to this issue, the Prologue clearly attributes to the enmity of the adults, “parents’ strife”, the tragic destiny of the “children’s end”, a reminder, it may be argued, that the waging of war involves primarily the death and sacrifice of the young, not of the old. However, as the feud will demonstrate, although the sacrificial victims are essentially the young, all levels of society are involved. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the intervention of the Prince after the first skirmish presented in the play, shows the involvement of the State. J.A. Bryant has sustained that Shakespeare has given Prince Escalus “a growing presentiment of what must happen to everyone in Verona if the wound in the civil body cannot be healed”¹⁰, and the critic argues that the Prince knows from the beginning that the keeping of the peace constitutes a matter of life and death. The play documents how the Church too, becomes involved in the feud, particularly when Friar Lawrence celebrates the secret wedding of Romeo and Juliet, though against his better judgement (“they stumble that run fast”, II. iii. 90) in the hope of bringing about a reconciliation: “this alliance may so happy prove / To turn your households’ rancour to pure love” (II. iii. 87-88). Bryant sustains that “Friar Lawrence’s error lies in the execution of the thing, in letting a Heaven-made marriage remain an affair of secret messages, rope ladders, and unorthodox sleeping potions”¹¹. The third fundamental social entity involved in the feud is the family. The two households of the Montagues and Capulets are presented as responsible for the rise and continuance of the feud, but the action of the play also documents how the feud becomes intertwined with the marriage projects of the Capulets. G.A. Harrison has observed how, in Shakespeare’s time, “The father was the head of the family and its ruler”¹², and though this absolute dominion was sometimes questioned, nonetheless “the picture of the Capulet family is not far from the fact”¹³. Consequently, Juliet’s fear of revealing to her family her secret marriage to a representative of the adverse feuding household results in her apparently unmotivated refusal to obey her father’s commands, in contrast to her previous meek submission to the marriage project. In this way she poses a challenge to Capulet’s paternal authority and arouses his sense of patriarchal prerogative and supremacy, with the consequences that follow.

London 1996 [1973], pp. 47-48.

¹⁰ J.c. Bryant ed., *William Shakespeare: The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, p. lxxv.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. lxxvi. For different interpretations of the Friar Lawrence’s behaviour and motivations, see J. C. Bryant, *The Problematic Friar in Romeo and Juliet*, “English Studies”, LV, 1974, pp. 340-350, and G. Brenner, *Shakespeare’s Politically Ambitious Friar*, “Shakespeare Studies”, XIII, 1980, pp. 47-58.

¹² G.B. Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare*, 3rd ed. revised and expanded, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1991 [1939], p. 95.

¹³ *Ibidem.*

It may be argued that Shakespeare, in his Prologue, wants to underline the dangers of intestinal strife, proposing the disastrous effects of the feud in the play as an admonition against what had happened in the past and as a warning against the likelihood of a repetition in the future. The possibility that “new mutiny” could break out “From ancient grudge”, was a real one for Shakespeare, who had confronted this contingency in the already written history plays, just as he would continue to do so in those that he was to write in the future. It is here argued that the playwright also proposed this issue in *Romeo and Juliet*, in the presentation of the feud and its characteristics. In fact, the impression created in the opening scene is a double and almost paradoxical one of simultaneously continuous and intermittent conflict. Thus on the one hand the Prince refers to the fact that “Three civil brawls bred of an airy word / By thee, old Capulet, and Montague, / Have thrice disturb’d the quiet of our streets” (I. i. 87-89), in this way clearly deprecating the repetition of violence, and on the other hand Montague asks Benvolio “Who set this ancient quarrel new abroad?” (I. i. 102), implying the recrudescence of something assuaged. The impression created is that of a dangerous and smouldering state of discord, ready to explode into open strife.

At the time of Shakespeare a potential for social disruption and armed conflict was not only present in latent form. L. Levenson has pointed out that in England proclamations had been issued by Henry VII, Henry VIII and Elizabeth against fighting in public, but that brawls continued to break out and that “dangerous feuds threatened the peace of whole counties”¹⁴. The situation represented in the play was thus not alien to the actual state of the nation in the late sixteenth century.

The danger inherent in internal strife was often presented in Elizabethan literature as a sickness or disease of the body politic. In *Romeo and Juliet* there is ample evidence that Shakespeare intends the feud to be interpreted as the external manifestation of a state of sickness in the body politic, particularly given that the presentation of the feud may be recognized as evidencing many of the features and characteristics of a real malady. Indeed, an authentic and not only a metaphorical disease will be discovered to be present in Verona. In Act V, scene ii, Friar John informs Friar Lawrence that he has been unable to deliver the letter containing the information of Juliet’s false death to Romeo because, as he explains, on seeking out a fellow Franciscan to accompany him to Mantua, “the searchers of the town, / Suspecting that we both were in a house / Where the infectious pestilence did reign, / Seal’d up the doors, and would not let us forth” (V. ii. 8-11). The “infectious pestilence” was traditionally the plague, so that in the last act of the tragedy the audience comes to know that Verona is infected by this disease. Brian Gibbon has pointed out that “that there would be for an Elizabethan audience a cruelly familiar plausibility, as well as apt symbolic significance, in the outbreak of the plague which prevents Friar John from getting through to Romeo”¹⁵.

¹⁴ J.L. Levenson, *Alla stoccado carries it away: Codes of Violence in Romeo and Juliet*, in *Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet: Texts, Contexts, and Interpretation*, Jay L. Halio ed., University of Delaware Press, Newark/Associated University Press, London 1995, p. 85.

¹⁵ *Romeo and Juliet*, B. Gibbons ed., p. 61.

Nonetheless, already in the Prince's speech in the opening of the play, there are indications of the perception of the feud as malady. When Escalus calls on the Montagues and Capulets to "quench the fire of your pernicious rage / With purple fountains issuing from your veins" (I. i. 82-83), the image calls to mind the practice of blood-letting, the usual way, in Shakespeare's time, for treating the aggressiveness of a sickness. Not by chance does the playwright use the adjective "pernicious", a usual collocation with disease. Moreover, in the phrase "mistemper'd weapons" (I. i. 85), there is not only the obvious allusion to the dated and rusty swords of the two old men, but also the implication of the now obsolete but then current meaning of "to temper", namely, "To restore the proper 'temper' or 'temperament' to; to bring into a good or desirable state of body or health; to cure, heal, refresh", so that the contrary, "mistemper", signifies "to exacerbate" or "to worsen" the state of bodily health. Furthermore, the Prince speaks of the "cank' red hate" of the families, where the word "cankered", carries the sixteenth century signification of "Infected, polluted; infectious, venomous". It is also perhaps not casual that the Prince should assert that the brawls are "bred of an airy word" (I. i. 87), an expression in which may be discerned an allusion to the transmittance of pestilence by means of the air.

However, an even more cogent justification for reading of the feud as disease comes from the Prologue itself. Here it is affirmed that the feud "makes civil hands unclean" (verse 4). The adjective "unclean" obviously alludes to the hands defiled by blood, but it should be noted that in the Geneva Bible of 1560, which was the version chiefly used in the home at the time of Shakespeare, in various passages in Chapters 13 and 14 of the Book of Leviticus, that treat the question of the identification and handling of leprosy on the part of the priest, there occurs the association of "plague", "leprosy" and "unclean". Verse 45 of Chapter 13 reads: "The leper also in whom the plague is, shall have his clothes rent, and his head bare, and shall put a covering upon his lips and shall cry, I am unclean, I am unclean"¹⁶. Even more relevant and significant are verses 43-44 in Chapter 14:

But if the plague come again and break out in the house, after that he hath taken away the stones, and after that he hath scraped and plastered the house, / Then the priest shall come and see: and if the plague grows in the house, it is a fretting leprosy in the house: it is therefore unclean.

It is particularly significant that here there is the reference to the presence of plague "in the house", thus recalling the two "households" of Shakespeare.

Furthermore, it is also extremely pertinent to recall the malediction of Mercutio at a moment which represents the ultimate negative exitus of disease, namely, the moment of death. Addressing Romeo, Mercutio employs twice a traditional maledictory expression involving the plague: "A plague [on]", linking it, however, indicatively, to the two feuding houses: "A plague o' both your houses" (III. i. 92, 108).

¹⁶ See the text reproduced in *Introduction to the Geneva Bible*, Dr. W.H. Noah – Dr. D.L. Brown, 2001 & 2005, logosresourcepages.org/idx_geneva.htm.

The perception of the feud as disease allows the reader to understand and appreciate more clearly some of its characteristics as manifested in the play. It has three features typical of endemic diseases: propagation, virulency and aggressiveness, each followed by specific sequelae. Though these three traits characterize the feud constantly and simultaneously, the three episodes of the explosion of the feud, what may be termed the specific feud-moments – the initial representation of the feud in Act I, scene i, the climax of the feud in Act III, scene i, and the conclusion of the feud in Act V, scene iii¹⁷ – well document these individual aspects.

In the first scene of the play the feud breaks out in the verbal skirmish between Sampson and Gregory of the Capulet faction, and Abram and Balthasar of the Montague one, and degenerates into armed conflict. From a mere exchange of insults among servant-men, the conflict spreads, in an extremely brief space of time, to the two respectable representatives of the feuding houses and to the citizens of Verona. The sequela is the proscription of the Prince.

The virulency of the feud as morbidity is perceptible in Act III. Just as an illness can be acutely malignant and violent in its effects, so here the feud shows its extreme and intense virulence in the vehemence and acrimony of the speech exchanges and in the rancour and bitterness of the tempers manifested by Mercutio and Tybalt, as also in the fierceness and ferociousness of the subsequent belligerence of Tybalt and Romeo. The sequela is the banishment of Romeo.

The increasing aggressiveness of a sickness is manifested in Romeo's behaviour at the tomb of Juliet. Tainted by the virus of anguish, contaminated by the infection of despair, intolerant of any interruption or deferral of his elected suicidal purpose, Romeo, after a brief attempt to avert the challenge of Paris, allows himself to be provoked, and responds with swift ferocity. The sequelae are the death of Paris, the suicides of Romeo and Juliet and the end of the feud.

If the specific sequelae indicated in these episodes are the most obvious, it must also be noted that, as with an intensely virulent disease, the usual sequelae of the feud are similarly noxious. In fact, with its encumbering pressure of violence and disorder the feud establishes the texture of life in Verona, an unhealthy body politic in which actions or non-actions equally reverberate on the whole web of human relationships. This in turn creates an atmosphere of foreboding that may be confused with predetermination and that Romeo in particular attributes to the intervention of Fate or the stars¹⁸. In actual

¹⁷ See D.A. Stauffer, *Shakespeare's World of Images*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington/London 1949, p. 55.

¹⁸ The question of determinism or free choice in the play has been amply debated. For different points of view see A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, Macmillan, London 1963 [1904], p. 9; E.K. Chambers, *Shakespeare: A Survey*, Sidgwick and Jackson, London 1925, pp. 70-71; J. Masefield, *Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, London 1927, pp. 69-70; J.W. Draper, *Shakespeare's 'Star-Crossed Lovers'*, "Review of English Studies", XV, 1935, pp. 16-34; E.E. Stoll, *Shakespeare's Young Lovers*, Oxford University Press, London 1937, pp. 4-5; *Sixteen Plays of Shakespeare*, G.L. Kittredge ed., Ginn, New York 1946 [1939], p. 674; H.B. Charlton, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1948, pp. 49-63; D.A. Stauffer, *Shakespeare's World of Images*, pp. 55-57; F.M. Dickey, *Not Wisely But Too Well: Shakespeare's Love Tragedies*, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA 1957, pp. 63-117; W.H. Auden, *Commentary on the Poetry and Tragedy of Romeo*

fact what happens is that individual resolutions and evaluations must continually measure themselves against the background of the feud and accordingly involve repercussions and reverberations that extend well beyond the possible effects in normal and salubrious circumstances. In particular, the consequences of decisions in the context of the disease of the feud reveal themselves to be outstandingly unpredictable, uncontrollable and disproportionate.

Furthermore, not only the consequences of decisions taken but the choices themselves of the characters are determined in large measure by the way in which individuals pose themselves with regard to the unhealthy web of the feud. The only character who wallows in the diseased body politic is Tybalt, who may be termed a feud-monger in the sense furnished by the *Oxford English Dictionary* that documents how “In formations dating from the middle of the 16th c. onwards *-monger* nearly always implies one who carries on a contemptible or discreditable ‘trade’ or ‘traffic’ in what is denoted by the first element of the compound”. In Tybalt’s case the element he traffics in is the feud, given that he lives entirely according to the canons of feudal conflict. Then there are the characters that attempt to be peace-makers, like the Prince, Benvolio and the Friar, all of whom make mistakes in underestimating the dangers of the feud-situation, the first in not adopting an earlier and stronger position against it, the second in miscalculating the effects of advising the Montague Romeo to go to a dance in the house of the rival Capulet family, the third in not taking the necessary precautions to guarantee the transmission to Romeo of the information of Juliet’s false death. A third group of characters assume what they consider to be their responsibilities in the feud, such as Mercutio when he feels obliged to take up the challenge of Tybalt that Romeo has refused, or such as Paris, when he tries to apprehend Romeo as grave-breaker at the tomb of Juliet. It is part of the pernicious and destructive effects of the feud that both lose their lives. Finally, there are the two protagonists: Juliet, who is aware of the feud and its dangers but apparently ignores both, and Romeo, who

and Juliet, in *Romeo and Juliet* (The Laurel Shakespeare), F. Fergusson ed., Dell, New York 1958, pp. 21-39; I. Ribner, *Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy*, London 1960, pp. 26-27; G.B. Harrison, *Shakespeare’s Tragedies*, p. 48; J. Lawlor, *Romeo and Juliet*, in *Early Shakespeare*, J.R. Brown – B. Harris ed, Arnold, London 1961, pp. 123-143; P. N. Siegel, *Christianity and the Religion of Love in Romeo and Juliet*, “Shakespeare Quarterly”, XII, 1961, p. 383; D.L. Peterson, *Romeo and Juliet and the Art of Moral Navigation*, in *Pacific Coast Studies in Shakespeare Waldo*, F. McNeir – T.N. Greenfield ed., University of Oregon Books, Eugene 1966, pp. 33-46; R.W. Battenhouse, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Art and Its Christian Premises*, University of Indiana Press, Bloomington 1969, pp. 102-130; B. Evans, *Shakespeare’s Tragic Practice*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1979, pp. 22-51; T.J. Cribb, *The Unity of Romeo and Juliet*, “Shakespeare Survey”, XXXIV, 1981, pp. 93-104; B. Cardullo, *The Friar’s Flaw, the Play’s Tragedy: The Experiment of Romeo and Juliet*, “Forum for Modern Language Studies”, XXI, 1985, pp. 97-104; L. Scragg, *Shakespeare’s Mouldy Tales: Recurrent Plot Motifs in Shakespearean Drama*, Longman, London 1992, p. 160; J.F. Andrews, *Falling in Love: The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, in his ed., *Romeo and Juliet: Critical Essays*, Garland Publishing, New York/London 1993, pp. 408-416; D. Waters, *Christian Settings in Shakespeare’s Tragedies*, Associated University Presses, London 1994, pp. 138-140; F. Laroque, *Tradition and Subversion in Romeo and Juliet*, in *Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet*, L. Halio ed., pp. 32-33; C. Leech, “The Moral Tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*”, in *Critical Essays*, Porter ed., p. 19; S. Quilliam, *Romeo and Juliet*, Penguin, London, 1999 [1985] p. 83; A. Leggatt, *Shakespeare’s Tragedies: Violation and Identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, pp. 48-49; *Romeo and Juliet*, G. Blakemore Evans ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/New York 2008 [1984], p. 16; E. Smith, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008 [2007], pp. 122-123; Dillon, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare’s Tragedies*, p. 42.

always appears unaware of the existence of the feud, as evidenced by his attitude on his entry on the scene of the brawl in Act I, who seems continually surprised by its constant eruption into his life, as documented by his reactions to Tybalt's challenge and to Mercutio's death in Act III, and who persistently attributes to the operation of destiny what are instead the deleterious effects processes of the feud-disease itself, as in Act V.

A final point to notice is that, in the feud logic that dominates the play, even actions that go contrary to this logic become paradoxically as destructive as those that conform to it. Thus old Capulet's imposition on Tybalt not to challenge Romeo at the dance produces in Tybalt an even greater animosity against Romeo and his decision to seek satisfaction the next morning; Romeo's refusal to fight against Tybalt results in Mercutio's taking up the challenge in his stead and getting killed; the Prince's decision to banish Romeo instead of sentencing him to death leads to Paris's demand to Romeo to go with him to judgment with the consequent duel and death of Paris. It is also not casual that two of these three episodes correspond to two of the feud-moments of the play.

If the feud represents the exterior manifestation of the internal disease of the body politic, it also manifests the metatheatrical dramatization of Shakespeare's compositional aims as indicated in the Prologue¹⁹. There the Chorus gives voice to three specific purposes: the first is contained in the reference to "fair Verona, where we lay our scene" (verse 2), the second in the assertion of "the two hours' traffic of our stage" (verse 12), the third in the claim that "What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend" (verse 14). The first purpose alludes to the presentation of a location, background, context, environment or set of circumstances, effected by the setting of the scene through the words and descriptions of the playwright. This documents the method through which in the theatre words can create reality by presenting an actuality that exists only in the minds of the characters and/or in the words themselves and not in the fictional situation on hand. It is symptomatic of the way in which, in the theatre, words may appear to acquire an autonomous identity, and of the manner in which what is asserted as being done is equivalent to, or a substitute for, the actual doing. It thus also involves the mode by means of which dramatic action may come to exist only in the language itself so that the reality of deeds is substituted by the reality of words. The second purpose indicates the stage performance, that constitutes the essence of the theatrical realization of the work. Quite apart from the capacity of words to generate action and reaction, this assertion gives proof of the fundamental exigency for dramatic movement, the need for theatrical action on the stage, so as to further the progression of the dynamic necessities of the plot. The third purpose

¹⁹ It is interesting to document how *Romeo and Juliet: The Tragedie of Romeo and Iuliet*, N. de Somogyi ed., Nick Hern Books, London 2009, p. 194, points out that the absence of the Prologue from the Folio may have been due to a desire to avoid its stress on the theatrical representation, thus laying "a contrary emphasis on the play's unique authorship as a text to be read (rather than a script to be performed)". On the question of the presence of a prologue and a chorus in the play, see E. Pearlman, *Shakespeare at Work: Romeo and Juliet*, in *Critical Essays*, Porter ed., pp. 112-115. On the meaning of the theatrical experience in *Romeo and Juliet*, see M. Goldman, *Shakespeare and the Energies of Drama*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. 1972, pp. 33-44, on the function of the choric perspective in the play, see J. Dillon, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Tragedies*, pp. 40-42, and on the more general question of the metadramatic issues in the play, see J.L. Calderwood, *Shakespearean Metadrama*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1971, pp. 109-111.

implies the linguistic, thematic and ideological manipulations that the theatrical text can operate, both in relation to the source material²⁰ but also with regard to the initial premises of the play itself. It will here be shown how the three feud-moments previously mentioned may be perceived as documenting these three purposes.

With regard to “where we lay our scene”, various meanings and significations of the term “scene”, as formulated by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, may be identified as coalescing in Act I, scene i. The first is “The stage or theatre taken as standing for either the dramatic art or the histrionic profession”, in other words, the theatre as autonomous form of art, as artistic typology involving a specific kind of professional writing, acting and representation. A second definition reads “The action or representation of a piece upon the stage; a stage-performance; a play or drama in representation”, and refers to the actual theatrical *pièce* in question, the play itself, in the case on hand, *Romeo and Juliet*. A third definition indicates “The place in which the action of a play, or part of a play, is supposed to occur. Hence also, the setting of a dialogue, novel, etc.” As documentation of this use, the *Dictionary* quotes precisely the verse on hand from *Romeo and Juliet*: “In fair Verona, where we lay our scene”. In fact, it is obvious from Act I, scene i that Shakespeare collocates the scene in the specific locality of the city of Verona. This use of “scene” is closely related to the further definition of “The place where an action is carried on and people play their parts as in a drama ... the place where events are actually happening or business being done”. This description is particularly pertinent to the presentation, already in the Prologue, of Verona as the place where the action of the feud is carried on²¹, and of the various people – specifically, the lovers and their parents – involved in the feud itself and in its consequences. This definition also anticipates, through the use of the term “business”, the next indication of the Chorus, in this same Prologue, of the play as “traffic” (“business”). Two other meanings of “scene”, with reference to the theatre, present fruitful significations for consideration: “A view or picture presented to the eye (or to the mind) of a place, concourse, incident, series of actions or events, assemblage of objects, etc.”, and also “An episode, situation, etc. forming a subject of narration or description”. It is the particular pertinence of these two definitions that will now be examined with regard to Act I, scene i.

In this scene there occurs the expounding of the action essential for the play, as also the stage-performance of what is important for the development of the plot. Indeed, this first scene sets out and lays open, in the two parts which constitute it, the two dimensions essential for the comprehension of the tragedy: the feud situation, already in part indicated above, with its hate, swiftness, aggressiveness, aggrandizement, and social involvement, and the contrasting romance situation, with its love, slowness, apathy, contraction and solitariness.

²⁰ On the differences between the prefatory material in Brooke's *Romeus and Juliet*, and Shakespeare's Prologue, see Smith, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare*, pp. 120-123.

²¹ Gayle Whittier, *The Sonnet's Body and the Body Sonnetized in Romeo and Juliet*, “Shakespeare Quarterly”, XL, 1989, p. 59, has noted how the Prologue sonnet cautions that Verona is a fiction, and D. Bruster and R. Weimann, *Prologues to Shakespeare's Theatre: Performance and Liminality in Early Modern Drama*, Routledge, London 2004, p. 112, have pointed out how the Prologue stresses “the actual terms of its theatrical production”.

The first part of the scene proposes, in its words and actions, a precise pattern that is not only repeated in the second part of the scene, but also twice more in the rest of the play, in Act III and Act V.

The scene opens with the verbal quibbling of the two Capulet servants, Sampson and Gregory, with their bawdry word-play and vulgar punning. This is followed by their encounter with the two Montague servants, Abram and Balthasar, and the text demonstrates how quickly offensive words lead to aggressive action, as the two groups engage in armed conflict. Benvolio draws his sword to try to impose the peace, and his function as peace-maker is testified by his words (“you know not what you do”, I, i, 61-62), that intentionally echo Christ’s words of forgiveness on the Cross²². It is an intervention that documents one of the many situations in the play in which positive intentions give rise to negative consequences, due precisely to the feud situation. This is a good example of how Benvolio’s action of drawing his sword, well-meaning but dangerous, leads to an outcome that is the direct opposite of what he desires. In fact Tybalt, arriving on the scene, immediately interprets it in terms of the feud logic, so that although Benvolio calls on him to help him to keep the peace, Tybalt draws a different inference from the situation: “What, drawn, and talk of peace?” (I. i. 67), and he consequently goes on to give expression to the hate-logic of the play: “I hate the word [peace], / As I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee” (I. i. 67-68). The situation degenerates further with the intervention, first of several citizens with clubs or partisans, and then of the two heads of the families, old Montague and old Capulet with their wives, showing how endemic the feud is and how quickly it flares up from smouldering enmity into blazing hostility, so that it takes the authoritative and angry action of Prince Escalus to divide the fighting factions and restore order.

The second part of the scene begins with the comments of the Montagues and Benvolio on the brawl. First, Montague requests an explanation of the situation from Benvolio. This narration of an action that the audience has already witnessed occurs once more in Act III, with Benvolio again as narrator, and in Act V, this time with Friar Laurence as narrator. On each occasion, the public has a double perspective from which to view and judge the action: the enactment of the events themselves, and a linguistic reconstruction of the events. The narration of Benvolio is accurate, only indulging in an elaboration of the intervention of Tybalt, presented as “fiery” (I. i. 107), and as swinging his sword and cutting the winds with it, winds that, unharmed, “hiss’d him in scorn” (I. i. 110). If here the winds are unhurt by Tybalt’s intervention and scorn him, in Act III he will instead kill Mercutio and express his scorn for all his adversaries.

The comment of Lady Montague introduces the name of Romeo: “Right glad I am he was not at this fray” (I. i. 115), dramatic irony in view of Romeo’s later participation, with its tragic consequences, in the “fray” of Act III. The question of Lady Montague with regard to the whereabouts of Romeo allows Benvolio to present a further narration, this time of the love-sick, lonely and melancholy hero²³. Thus the two parts of the scene

²² *Luke*, xxiii, 34: “And Jesus said: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”

²³ G.B. Harrison, *Shakespeare’s Tragedies*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1961 [1951], p. 51, notes, of Romeo, that “For the moment he is the complete melancholic”.

are linked by Benvolio's function of describer of both the feud skirmish and the lover-protagonist.

It is interesting to note how the scene is laid for the entry of Romeo, first by the description of Benvolio, and then by the further and corroborating narration of Montague. Through the latter's worried words and poetic images, a romanticized perception of the hero is generated in the audience before his actual physical entrance on the stage; he is perceived as "With tears augmenting the fresh morning's dew, / Adding to clouds more clouds with his deep sighs" (I. i. 130-131); and, when the sun draws "The shady curtains from Aurora's bed" (I. i. 134), Romeo "private in his chamber pens himself, / ... / And makes himself an artificial night" (I. i. 136, 138). The description of Montague also serves to create around Romeo an aura of tragic foreboding, as his father defines the possible continuance of his son's mood as "Black and portentous" (I. i. 139), also comparing Romeo's state with that of "the bud bit with an envious worm / Ere he can spread his sweet leaves to the air / Or dedicate his beauty to the sun" (I. i. 149-151), thus in effect anticipating the tragic conclusion of the play. Moreover, there is further dramatic irony in the fact that Romeo's father sustains that disastrous effects will attend the cause of Romeo's sickness, if it is not removed. In actual fact, Romeo's love infatuation for Rosaline will be removed, but only to leave space for the far more dangerous love for Juliet. This, after the documentation of the perilous potential of the feud, is another anticipation of the tragic outcome.

The entry of Romeo lays the scene for further essential information. His comment regarding the signs of the skirmish is indicative: "What fray was here? / Yet tell me not, for I have heard it all" (I. i. 171-172). The words well document and anticipate what will be Romeo's basic attitude: a nonchalant but also essentially vexed stance of underestimation of the feud and its effects.

It is indicative that this second part of the scene re-proposes certain elements of the first part. Most evidently, there is the punning and word-play of Romeo that recalls that of Sampson and Gregory. Obviously that of Romeo is sophisticated, Petrarchan in character and style, with a dominant use of oxymorons ("O brawling love, O loving hate / [...] / O heavy lightness, serious vanity / [...] / Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health / [...] / [...] A madness most discreet, / A choking gall, and a preserving sweet" (I. i. 174, 176, 178, 191-192). Nonetheless, paradoxically, Romeo's presentation of his courtship of Rosaline makes use of analogous imagery of warfare waged against the woman as that expressed more vulgarly by the Capulet servants. In fact, the courtly love convention, filtered through Petrarchan amorous conceits, makes use of a series of expressions of attack and defence: "she'll not be hit / With Cupid's arrow [...] / [...] in strong proof of chastity well arm'd / [...] / She will not stay the siege of loving terms / Nor bide th'encounter of assailing eyes" (I. i. 206-207, 208, 210-211). It is also interesting to observe that the future "traffic", as "business" or "commerce", makes its appearance in the words of Romeo with reference to Rosaline, who will not "ope her lap to saint-seducing gold" (I. i. 212), and who is "rich in beauty, only poor" (I. i. 213) in not wanting to augment her store, so that, as consequence, she "in that sparing makes huge waste" (I. i. 216). In the concluding part of the scene, Romeo further refers to "The precious treasure of his eyesight lost" (I. i.

231), and Benvolio comments that he will try to continue to teach Romeo to forget Rosaline, “or else die in debt” (I. i. 236). A final point to note is that Benvolio’s well-meaning advice to Romeo to examine other beauties will lead the hero to the Capulet feast and to the meeting with Juliet, with all the consequences. It is also indicative that Romeo, commenting on this advice, employs the metaphor of a mask hiding but also exalting the beauty of a woman, another anticipation of the situation of his meeting with Juliet.

Detailed attention has been dedicated to this opening scene of the play in which Shakespeare “lay[s] our scene” because it poses the premises for the whole drama: the feud situation, the love situation, together with a series of events that will be repeated: the feud skirmishes, the interventions of Benvolio and Tybalt, the involvement of the Verona community and the Montagues and Capulets, the intervention of the Prince, the presentation of the personality of Romeo (first through narration and then through stage presentation), the intimations of tragedy, the allusions to “traffic”, the anticipations of the Capulet masked ball and of the meeting with Juliet.

The amplitude and extent of Shakespeare’s laying of the scene of feud and love in the opening of Act I is followed by the second metatheatrical intimation in the Prologue that may be dealt with more quickly: the Chorus’s assertion that the topic of love, parents’ feud and children’s deaths “Is now the two hours’ traffic of our stage” (verse 12). The wider meaning of “traffic”, as provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “The buying and selling or exchange of goods for profit; bargaining; trade”, but one of its figurative significations is given as “Intercourse, communication; dealings, business”, and in this context the *Dictionary*, not by chance, furnishes as example precisely verse 12 of the Prologue. Although it is evident that every scene of the play needs to the “laid”, and that every scene has its “traffic”, it is here sustained that this term, used by the Chorus to describe the whole of the play, is nonetheless particularly pertinent with regard to the second feud-moment of the play in Act III, scene i. In effect, this scene is particularly rich in various forms of dramatic “dealings” and theatrical “business”²⁴: there are seven entries or re-entries, three exits, two fights, and one narration of events. The scene opens with Mercutio’s punning on Benvolio’s words and with his transference onto Benvolio of the evaluation of himself, followed by his further provocative quibbling with Tybalt regarding the latter’s use of such terms as “a word” (III. i. 38-39), “give [...] occasion” (III. i. 42-43), “consort” (III. i. 44-45), “my man” (III. i. 55, 58), in this recalling the quibbling and provocations of the Capulet servants in the first scene of the play. This introductory part of the scene is followed by Mercutio’s insults to Tybalt, resulting in their fight, fight in which Romeo, like Benvolio in the initial scene of the play, draws his sword to keep the peace. However, the result here is the death of Mercutio²⁵, that in turns provokes the duel between Tybalt and Romeo, the death of Tybalt and the flight of Romeo²⁶. As in the first scene of the play,

²⁴ B. Gibbons, *Romeo and Juliet*, p. 40 has observed how the act is woven into a complex pattern and how the death of Tybalt “binds the public drama of the opening moments of the play to the private drama of Romeo and Juliet”.

²⁵ On the implications of the death of Mercutio, see R.V. Utterback, *The Death of Mercutio*, “Shakespeare Quarterly”, XXIV, 1973, 2, pp. 105-116.

²⁶ For a reevaluation of the behaviour of Tybalt in this scene, see J. Limon, *Rehabilitating Tybalt: A New Inter-*

the citizens, the Capulets and Montagues, and the Prince intervene, and Benvolio again assumes the function of narrator, as he describes to the Prince what has happened, once more re-proposing in words what the audience has seen in action. This time Benvolio's account, longer than that in Act I²⁷, is clearly aimed at defending Romeo: he uses the epithet "envious" to describe Tybalt's fatal thrust against Mercutio, thus suggesting the former's bad faith; furthermore, he asserts that Romeo turned and fled, whereas in reality Romeo was struck motionless and it was Benvolio himself who urged him to flee. The Prince, condemning Romeo to banishment instead of the death sentence, comments, in the final verse of the scene: "Mercy but murders, pardoning those that kill" (III. i. 199). His words refer to the punishment of death in the event that Romeo should return from banishment, but they strike a peculiarly ominous note, given that the Prince has just shown mercy to the hero, who has killed. Indeed, it may be argued that it will be this mercy that will lead to the tragic fate and self-murder of Romeo. Interestingly, too, the wider sense of "traffic" as commerce, trade, appears in various declarations of the Prince in this scene: referring to Mercutio, he asks: "Who now the price of his dear blood doth owe?" (III. i. 185), following this with his contention that "I have an interest in your hearts' proceeding" (III. i. 190) and his assertions, to the Montagues, that "I'll amerce you with so strong a fine" (III. i. 192), and that "Nor tears nor prayers shall purchase out abuses" (III. i. 195). The dramatic interaction of Benvolio, Mercutio, and Romeo in this scene, their transactions, their contacts and contrasts, their verbal and armed exchanges, all this, combined with their several entries and exits, and the various allusions to "commerce" and "business", constitute a veritable "traffic" in relation to the feud and its manifestations.

The third and final metatheatrical assertion of the Chorus sustains that "What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend" (verse 14). However, this is preceded by a condition that involves the audience: "if you with patient ears attend" (verse 13). It may be noted that the audience is invited to attend with its ears, not its eyes, that is to say, listening to the words of the play rather than just looking at the action. The verb "attend" is shown, in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to comprise various contexts of signification, all pertinent to the invitation on hand. A first context reads: "To direct the ears, mind, energies to anything", and includes the concepts: "To turn one's ear to, listen to"; "To turn the mind to, give consideration or heed to, regard, consider"; "To turn the energies to, give practical heed to, apply oneself to, look after". A second entry indicates the meaning "To be present in readiness for service, or in answer to an authoritative summons". Another reading proposes the signification of "To wait for, await, expect", and is said to refer to "a future time, event, result, decision". This is indicated as an archaic meaning, but it may be closely related to the now obsolete (but current in Shakespeare's time) sense of "To look forward to, expect". Therefore, verse 13 of the Prologue contains the directions of the Chorus regarding the correct approach of the audience towards the play, and what the Chorus is in effect demanding of the public are four different but simultaneous and

pretation of the Duel Scene in Romeo and Juliet, in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, L. Halio ed., pp. 97-106.

²⁷ Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare*, p. 56, observes that "The speech is a typical piece of stage description of the kind fashionable at the time – over-elaborate and consciously poetical".

complementary attitudes: that it should predispose itself for a conscientious listening to the play, and thus to the words that constitute it; that it should dedicate attention and dutiful concentration to the feud; that it should adequately predispose itself for the performance on hand, ready to operate the necessary interaction with the text, so as to create the ideal conditions for the reception of the play; that it should look forward to and wait for the enactment of the action of the tragedy, as anticipated in the Prologue itself.

The final verse of the Prologue asserts that if there is something wrong, lacking or wanting in the Prologue itself, if the Chorus fails in the accomplishment or realization of its purpose (presumably that of efficaciously anticipating the contents and significance of the play: "What here shall miss"), then the promise is that "our toil", the hard and continuous exertion of the acting, the representation itself, will improve, "mend", what is deficient. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides the relevant meanings of "mend": "To remove or atone for defects"; "to correct (what is faulty); to improve by correction or alteration"; "To undergo rectification"; "To make better, ameliorate, improve". The concept here is the idea that what is amiss in the brief summary of the Prologue will be amended in the performance of the play. Given that the Prologue has focussed predominantly on the tragic destiny of the lovers in the context of the feud, according to the parameters of the original story, the most obvious interpretation of this last verse of the Prologue is that finally, in Act V, scene iii, what is [a]miss in the feud and its operation is atoned for, rectified and remedied by the death of the two protagonists. It is perhaps not casual that another area of meaning of the verb "to mend", indicated by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is the semantic context of health and illness. In this lexical field the dictionary furnishes the transitive meaning of "To restore to health, cure, heal", now archaic but current at the time of Shakespeare, as also the intransitive meaning of "To regain health; to recover from sickness", and, more specifically, "Of a wound, etc.: To heal. Of a malady: To abate"²⁸. The tragedy of the two lovers cures and restores to health their families and their town. Through their demise Verona regains the well-being of peace, while the feuding households recover from the sickness of conflict. It may certainly be sustained in a very real sense that the demise of Romeo and Juliet heals the wound of civil strife and abates the malady of the body politic so that the pestilence of the feud is extinguished by the deaths of the lovers.

Nonetheless, it is possible to read the final verses of the Prologue in an even more specifically metatheatrical sense. It may be retained that the Chorus is alluding to the way in which the concrete attendance at a theatrical event, the actual attentive listening to the evolving of the text, allows an "amendment", at the aesthetic level – that of the play as fiction and that of the audience as involved in and participator in the fiction – that would not be possible in the world of reality. In this way the Chorus would be referring to the sense of tragic completion that accompanies the experience of effective dramatic writing, that improvement on reality which theatrical texts attempt to furnish, and that ultimate

²⁸ This latter use is now indicated as dialectal, but it was normal usage in the sixteenth century, and indeed among the quotations there is Shakespeare's employment of the term in *Timon of Athens*, V. i. 190: "My long sicknesse Of Health, and Liuing, now begins to mend".

achievement which the “toil” of the playwright strives to attain.

To conclude, the feud emerges both as external manifestation of the internal disease in the body politic and as metatheatrical representation of Shakespeare’s dramatic purpose. In this way the emphasis on the feud in the Prologue, as also its continual presence throughout the play itself, may be read not only as the recurrent symptom of the state of malady in the state, not only as demonstration of the interconnection between the tragedy of civil strife and warfare and the tragedy of the love story of Romeo and Juliet, but also as the metadramatic means through which Shakespeare calls attention to the commitment and participation on the part of an audience that the theatrical text and performance necessitate. Ultimately it may even be argued that the Prologue stands as metatheatrical method employed by Shakespeare to give voice to his expectation of his public’s capacity to perceive, by careful listening, the way in which, from the diffused presence of the feud in the basic materials of the original story – a presence briefly and incompletely announced in the Prologue itself – the playwright is able, with artistic and dramatic toil, to achieve the complete and tightly woven fabric of a new and original tragedy.