

LITERATURE

ROMEO AND JULIET (III, i) — A STAGING ALTERNATIVE

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Although the first scene of the third act of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is a decisive moment, indisputably forming the turning-point in the development of the action and the dramatic tension of the work, it is nevertheless possible to gain the impression that not all its constituent elements have been satisfactorily interpreted and explained. Whereas the behaviour of Romeo and Mercutio in this scene have been the object of very detailed analyses¹, the role of Tybalt has been apprehended in what might be called a one-sided fashion. As a rule, commentators have limited themselves to affirming the incontestable fact that he kills Mercutio and perishes later by the hand of Romeo—without investigating the typically Shakespearean subtlety of the motive of his behaviour. It has of course been observed that Tybalt's guilt is extenuated by the fact that he is brazenly provoked to a duel by Mercutio, who acts in this way in order to prevent Romeo from fighting (Zbierski 1966: 203—225). Despite this, however, Tybalt is customarily treated — both by Shakespeare scholars and by theatre directors — as a headstrong adventurer, who without due cause seeks revenge on the innocent Romeo. But is it true that Tybalt has no due cause? After all, he himself recalls "the injuries/That thou [i.e. Romeo] hast done me" (*RJ*, III, i, 66—67). Further, there is the hitherto unexplained fact of Tybalt's flight, just after he has inflicted the fatal wound on Mercutio. The stage directions in the First Quarto (1597) refer explicitly to an escape: "Tybalt vnder Romeos arme thrusts Mercutio, in and flyes". Why does he escape? Not, surely, for fear of Romeo, since it was precisely Romeo, and not Mercutio, that he was seeking; in any case, he comes back in a moment in order to face him. Nor can it be because he

¹ The fullest account is given by H. Zbierski (1966:203— 225).

mortally wounds a man, since this and no other is the object of the combat. What, then, is the reason?

An attempt to offer a convincing answer to this question must begin with a close analysis of the motives for Tybalt's behaviour, seen "from his own point of view" — that is, from the point of view of the Renaissance gentleman, for whom matters of honour were matters of vital importance. Let us consider first the impulses which drove Tybalt along the road of revenge. The touchstone here was the appearance of Romeo at the Capulets' ball: it was known that Romeo had not been invited to this ball, and his irregular intrusion might well be considered as an insult to the house, and therefore to the family. We should not be surprised, then, by the reaction of the inflammable Tybalt, at the moment when he recognises the unbidden guest, who, to make matters worse, comes from a house rent by feud:

"Fetch me my rapier, boy. What dares the slave
Come hither, cover'd with an'antic face,
To f leer and scorn at our solemnity?
Now, by the stock and honor of my kin,
To strike him dead I hold it not a sin."

(I, v, 55—59)

Tybalt is not only personally insulted: he makes abundantly clear that it is his family's honour ("our solemnity", "honor of my kin") that is at stake; he is, moreover, convinced of the justice of his indignation, in accordance with the principles of honour mandatory at the time. This is also why not even the murder of Romeo would be, in his view, "a sin". Restrained by Capulet, he yet swears vengeance:

"Patience perforce with willful choler meeting
Makes my flesh tremble in their different greeting.
I will withdraw, but this intrusion shall,
Now seeming sweet, convert to bitt' rest gall."

(I, v, 89—92)

Although this is not shown directly on the stage (i.e. in the text of the play), Tybalt proceeds to action: on the next day at daybreak, he sends a letter to Romeo, probably containing a challenge to a duel. This is mentioned by Benvolio to Mercutio:

"Ben. Tybalt, the kinsman to old Capulet
Hath sent a letter to his [i.e. Romeo's] father's house.
Mer. A challenge, on my life.
Ben. Romeo will answer it."

(II, iv, 6—9)

Mercutio is quite right in believing that the letter contains a challenge (there is no further mention of this in the text), but Benvolio is mistaken: Romeo

makes no reply to the letter because, having spent the night with Juliet, he had not yet reached home and in fact did not read the letter. Benvolio's comment has yet another meaning. When he calmly asserts that Romeo will answer the challenge (and, if necessary, proceed to a duel), he implies that Romeo will comport himself as a man of honour, since to leave such a challenge unanswered would be a dishonourable act. And yet this is exactly what happened! From Tybalt's point of view, by failing to answer his letter Romeo showed that he did not take him seriously — thus adding insult by injury. Perhaps, moreover, Tybalt judged that Romeo — having heard of his skill in the lists — was not turning out to be as brave as befitted a gentleman, and was sitting out the storm somewhere in the town, in hiding. This, then, is why at about noon — not having had a reply to his letter — he loses patience and personally goes in search of Romeo, to administer a suitable lesson and deal him severe punishment for the "wrong-doing".

It is worth mentioning that when it comes to their meeting, Tybalt refers to his rival by the term "villain", which does not necessarily denote "criminal" or "malefactor". Indeed, this would be unwarranted invective. One of the definitions given by the OED is "a man of ignoble ideas", that is, a man without a code of honour or a man who does not observe the code. Shakespeare uses the word in this sense in other plays (e.g. in *The Comedy of Errors*, V, i, 29 ff). From this it should be inferred that when he addresses Romeo with the words "thou art a villain" (III, i, 61), Tybalt is thinking of what in his judgement is the dishonourable behaviour of Romeo, who a) attends the ball uninvited, b) does not reply to the letter containing the challenge, and presumably c) in general avoids the meeting.

Of course, as a consequence of the unfortunate sequence of circumstances, when it actually comes to the meeting Romeo knows little of what is in Tybalt's mind; in the first place, he is not aware that he was recognised at the ball, and in the second place he has not yet been home and has not read the letter. The behaviour of Romeo, who expressly avoids a quarrel, is the more comprehensible since he has just become married to Juliet; Tybalt, knowing nothing of this, has already been his kinsman for "an hour". Mercutio does not know about this either, and judges that after a night of frolic with Rosaline Romeo will be in no fit condition for a duel with such a skilled fencer as Tybalt. It is Mercutio who earlier in the play admitted that Tybalt:

"...fights
as you sing prick-song, keeps time, distance, and
proportion; he rests his minim rests, one, two, and the
third in your bosom; the very butcher of a silk button,
a duellist, a duellist; a gentleman of the very first
house, of the first and second cause".

(II, iv, 20—25)

And in the same scene he expresses his worries about the result of the duel:

"Alas, poor Romeo, he is already dead,
stabb'd with a white wench's black yee, run through
the ear with love-song, the very pin of his heart
cleft with the blind bow-boy's butt-shaft; and is he a
man to encounter Tybalt?"

(II, iv, 13–17)

By provoking Tybalt to a duel, Mercutio as it were replaces Romeo in the discharge of this honourable obligation. Everything, indeed, is enacted with the Elizabethan code of honour, which provided for a kinsman or close friend to replace a combatant who was not capable of fighting. In the opposite case — that is, if Romeo was physically fit (in Mercutio's opinion), to relieve him of the obligation of the duel would be a dishonourable act. Tybalt avoids quarrelling; but when Mercutio's taunts exceed the bounds of endurance, he too draws his rapier.

Thus the duel begins. Romeo strives to avert a disaster. He shouts to Benvolio "Draw, Benvolio, beat down their weapons" (III, i, 86), which leads one to suppose that Romeo was not armed. If he had had a weapon, he would surely have done himself what he asked Benvolio to do. He calls on the gentlemen present to part the combatants: "Gentlemen, for shame, forbear this outrage!" (III, i, 87); but when this is without effect, he reminds them of the Duke's ban on duels in Verona (on pain of death). When, however, he sees that all his efforts are of no avail, he leaps between the combatants with the cry: "Hold Tybalt! Good Mercutio!" (III, i, 89). The stage direction, quoted above, informs us that at this moment Tybalt thrusts his rapier, under Romeo's arm, into the body of Mercutio, after which... he runs away ("flies").

The immediate question is: why does Tybalt run away? He is not a coward, after all. And in any case, what could he be afraid of? It appears to be an uncontrolled reflex act, the motives for which we shall try to establish. It must be something exceptional, seeing that Tybalt — who is very sensitive in matters of honour — resolves on the highly dishonourable act of running away. Was he really horrified by the shameful act of administering that crafty thrust under the arm of Romeo, taking advantage of Mercutio's momentary inattention? But how could we know that the thrust was so treacherous? Hardly anyone noticed it, after all. Everyone is amazed to see anything happen at all. Everyone, of course, except Tybalt, who must certainly have felt how deeply the blade penetrated the flesh. Even Mercutio himself appears to be surprised, when he confirms laconically: "I am hurt" (III, i, 90). If Tybalt's guile had been intended by Shakespeare, **then** the duel would have been played out in such a way that no-one would have been left in any doubt of it. But in fact there is doubt. The whole thing takes place unnoticed, seeing that Mercutio has to inform his friends standing close to him (and also the specta-

tors in the theatre) that he has been wounded. Characteristic, too, is Benvolio's surprise: "What, art thou hurt?" (III, i, 93); while Romeo takes Mercutio's black humour at its face value and belittles the "scratch": "Courage, man, the hurt cannot be much" (III, i, 95). The amazement of the witnesses of the whole incident is thus beyond dispute.

Whence, then, do we know that the thrust was administered craftily? We gain this information only from the report of Benvolio, when he describes the course of events to the Duke. This report is apparently delivered in the heat of the moment, and yet it is remarkably artful. Seeking to efface the guilt of Mercutio and Romeo, Benvolio lays the entire blame on Tybalt alone — and in a clearly tendentious manner at that. The inconsistency of Benvolio's statements with the facts has been noticed before; but in this case, scholars have made an exception, unreservedly accepting precisely that part of the description where Benvolio says: "...underneath whose [i.e. Romeo's] arm/An envious thrust from Tybalt hit the life/Of stout Mercutio..." (III, i, 167–169). This, then, is a rather detailed description, acting upon the imagination of the hearers; but one cannot help wondering how Benvolio was able to remember such details, in view of the fact that previously — that is, during the duel — he did not notice anything and indeed was amazed that anything had happened. Not even Romeo, Mercutio's closest friend, reproaches Tybalt (when the latter returns) with killing Mercutio out of guile. The only person who speaks of "envy" is Benvolio — and this at the moment when, recounting the facts to the Duke, he tries to cleanse Romeo of all blame, in order to show that he had to avenge the death of his treacherously slain friend. And thanks to the particular way in which he presents the course of events, he gains what he intended: the Duke commutes the death sentence to one of banishment. Thus this is not a description that can be relied upon without reservation. Yet this is precisely what happens traditionally in stage management and in critical scholarship. The infamous Tybalt, profiting by a moment of distraction on Mercutio's part, delivers him a treacherous thrust, after which — horrified by his own action — he flees.

Is this really the only way to interpret the flight of Tybalt? We have already reflected on the trustworthiness of Benvolio's words, and in the light of this it is by no means certain that Tybalt's deed was so disgraceful that he himself was horrified by it. Did he resort to treachery? To answer this question, and at the same time to indicate another possible interpretation, we must return to the moment when Romeo leaps in between the combatants, and once again consider the technical particulars of the duel. Now if we take for granted that Romeo was unarmed, we have a full explanation of the helplessness with which he tries to separate Tybalt and Mercutio. Helplessness and irresolution, shown in the fact that instead of jumping to action energetically himself, Romeo first asks Benvolio to act, and then the gentlemen present,

resulting from the danger that he would incur by leaping unarmed between the combatants. This is why Romeo decides to do precisely this only as a last resort, one might say in desperation, when he sees that no-one will do it for him. The danger came from the fact that Romeo might run onto the rapier's blade, thus becoming the unintended victim — and a victim without weapons, unable to parry a blow. It seems not improbable that this is what happened. Let us imagine that Tybalt strikes in order to hit Mercutio, when suddenly, as if from below the ground, Romeo appears before him. Fortunately, Tybalt is an excellent swordsman, and always a man of honour: although it is Romeo who was to have been his victim, it was forbidden to even so much as scratch a third person (i.e. not taking part in the duel); so, at the last moment, he changes the direction of the thrust (which cannot now simply “hang in the air”), and buries the blade into the open space between the trunk and arm of Romeo. And then he feels something that he did not foresee or intend: the blade strikes flesh. It is a mistake to conclude that Tybalt profited by Mercutio's temporary inattention — and treacherously dealt him a thrust from under Romeo's arm, while he was not looking. That would have been a dishonourable act, inconsistent with binding principles. Mercutio found himself quite by chance in this place that was to be fatal to him; only an unhappy sequence of events causes Tybalt to hit him. The fact that Tybalt's deed was not premeditated, nor even intimated in advance to anyone, is convincingly confirmed for us by the amazement which all the bystanders express. The fortuitousness of Mercutio's death would, moreover, be in harmony with the general character of this early tragedy of Shakespeare, in which chance and misfortune play a dominant role.

Thus when Tybalt, who does not want to injure Romeo, changes the direction of his thrust and strikes the unsuspecting Mercutio, he immediately realises what has happened. He — a man almost over-sensitive in matters of honour — commits a shameful act, unworthy of a gentleman! Chance imprints a stain on his honour and that of his family. This is what terrifies him; this is why he loses his head and reacts in a manner that is natural at such times — he runs away. After a time, however, he pulls himself together and, more or less composed, returns, in order to... Why does he return? To meet Romeo again? Or perhaps to show that his flight was no more than the weakness of the moment? There must have been something irrational about Tybalt's reappearance on the stage, since Romeo describes him as follows: “Here comes the furious Tybalt back again” (III, i, 121). Does “furious” mean “enraged”, or “deranged” (this latter meaning can be found in the OED)? This second interpretation appears the more probable. Of course Tybalt may also be “enraged”, but in his inner self, and for reasons that he knows best. From the point of view of Romeo, on the other hand, Tybalt is simply “deranged”, and it is precisely from this madness that comes the misfortune that he must

now avenge: Romeo, after all, still cannot understand the motives underlying Tybalt's behaviour. There can be no doubt that Tybalt fully realised that his sudden flight from the field of battle would be attributed to cowardice. So he comes back, to wipe away the disgrace which, in his eyes, covers the good name of his family. The outcome of the duel, from his point of view, no longer has much significance, since in the eyes of the citizens he would always remain compromised — Benvolio's account, after all, would easily be believed. For him, the only vital thing is to return. He is psychologically very far from a state of equilibrium, and it is perhaps for this reason that — shaken, enraged and “mad” — he succumbs in the duel. And yet he is an excellent swordsman; Mercutio had earlier, and not without reason, feared for the fate of Romeo. Must we, perhaps, assume — as has been done hitherto — that Romeo surpasses himself, and thanks to technical superiority forestalls Tybalt, dealing him fatal thrust? Or perhaps — and this seems more likely — Tybalt's nerves let him down, so that he died through lack of concentration? It is worth recalling that this duel is of very brief duration. In the stage directions we find a curt description: “They fight. Tybalt falls”. No-one says a word; perhaps no-one had time to say a word. Benvolio describes it as follows (and here he has no particular reason for concealing the truth):

“And to't they go like lightning, for, ere I
 Could draw to part them, was stout Tybalt slain;”
 (III, i, 172–173)

It is not, of course, important whether Benvolio really intended to separate them; what is important is that this intention serves to specify the duration of the duel². This is confirmed, in a sense, by Romeo himself, when he stands as if petrified over the dead Tybalt, as if he could not believe with his own eyes the truth of what had happened. Benvolio urges him: “Romeo, away, be gone! (...) Stand not amazed...” (III, i, 132–134). Is he not astounded at the ease with which he has despatched his adversary? It seems that only Tybalt's mental state can convincingly explain the fact that such an experienced and skilled swordsman can, in a split second, succumb to a youngster. This mental state, in turn, was provoked by the duel with Mercutio, and by its fortuitous and unhappy end.

The above solutions do not, of course, claim to be the definitive and final explanation of the questions touched on. They do constitute, however, one possible interpretation of them. As is usual in Shakespeare, there are many of these. This is particularly the case in theatres, where the director's arbitrary interpretations not uncommonly impoverish the psychological structure of the characters, and their actions on the stage are deprived of the hallmarks

² The surprising discrepancy between the duration of the duel as suggested by the text and that of the theatrical tradition was first noticed by H. Zbierski (1966:225)

of verisimilitude. For this reason also, the present article may be considered as a proposal for staging, deviating admittedly from traditional theatrical realisations of *Romeo and Juliet*, but faithful to the text of the play, and likewise to its great author.

REFERENCES

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