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## THE DANCE OF LOVE AND DANCE OF DEATH

### IN ROMEO AND JULIET

In Shakespeare's first romantic tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, the lovers meet on a festive occasion at the Capulets'. Romeo attends with Benvolio, Mercutio, and others, masked and uninvited—in Shakespeare's time a compliment to the host, as Old Capulet's manner indicates (I, v, 68-76). Romeo's friends, Mercutio in particular, urge him to participate in the festivities—"Nay, gentle Romeo, we must have you dance" (I, iv, 13). But he refuses both in speech and action: "Not I, believe me" (I, iv, 14), and "What's he . . . that would not dance?" (I, v, 134). My purpose is to investigate the significance of Romeo's not dancing as expressed in these two scenes, the fourth and fifth of Act I, and to contrast them with his activity in the first scene of Act III.

Shakespeare's sources for the play also have Romeo set apart most of the time. Arthur Brooke, in *The Tragicall Historie of Romeus and Juliet*, has Romeus stand aside for most of the evening, looking on; and much the same occurs in Luigi da Porto's version, *Istoria novellamente ritrovata di due Nobili Amanti* (c. 1530). The young lovers are attracted to each other's looks, but in both these sources, it is Juliet who approaches Romeo at the last dance of the evening and draws him into the ring on the excuse that Mercutio, on her other side, has icy hands, and at least the hand that Romeo holds will be warm.<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare alone emphasizes Romeo's not dancing at all, while—throughout the first part of the play—emphasizing dancing.

Thus, while approaching the festivities, Benvolio says (I, iv, 10), "We'll measure them a measure, and be gone." In scene v, old Capulet insists that all the ladies present must dance; and he and a relative argue—in a boring exchange completely unnecessary for the plot—how long ago they last danced. Juliet identifies the departing Romeo to the Nurse, not by his position or apparel but by his singular behavior: "What's he . . . that would not dance?" Later in the play, Mercutio says to Tybalt: "Here's my fiddlestick; here's that shall

make you dance" (III, i, 51-52). And, throughout the first half of the play—and the first half only—"brawl" and "measure," words which are also the names of specific dances, occur eleven times, "dance" or "dancing" seven times.

Why all this insistence on something that Romeo does not do? I believe the answer lies in the significance of dancing, as explained by E. M. W. Tillyard in *The Elizabethan World Picture* and as found in Sir John Davies' poem *Orchestra* (1594, 1596) and in Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Boke Named the Governour* (1531).

Says Tillyard, ". . . The created universe was itself in a state of music, . . . it was one perpetual dance."<sup>2</sup> After citing similar statements from Isidore of Seville, Thomas Elyot, and Milton, Tillyard concentrates on *Orchestra*, wherein "creative love first persuaded the warring atoms to move in order" (p. 97). To quote from Davies' own poem:

The fire air earth and water did agree  
By Love's persuasion, nature's mighty king  
To leave their first disordered combating  
And in a dance such measure to observe  
As all the world their motion should preserve. (St. 17)<sup>3</sup>

All things on earth participate in this dance, which figures each thing's, each man's, place in divine order. "Men looked on the world under three figures: a chain, a set of corresponding levels of existence, and a dance. Although Davies chooses to elaborate this last figure, he implies the other two. The very scheme of his poem consists in describing the fundamental dance of life throughout most of the links of the vast chain of being" (O, p. 11).

*Orchestra* was written in 1594, probably before *Romeo and Juliet*, and was published in 1596, probably after the first production of the play. There is no way of knowing whether Shakespeare read *Orchestra* in manuscript; but, as Tillyard says, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Troilus and Cressida* show "his knowledge of the general doctrine" (p. 95). Davies emphasizes that dancing puts disparate elements into smooth order, into harmony. Thus:

true Love, which dancing did invent,  
Is he that tun'd the world's whole harmony  
And linked all man in sweet society.

(St. 94)

Like the planets in their spheres, creating their musical harmonies, men in dancing, says Davies, are in social harmony. But Romeo does not dance, and

neither, according to the text, does Tybalt, who is too busy smelling out a Montague to partake in less choleric endeavors.

Stanza 109 of *Orchestra* interprets dancing as an image of concord; according to stanza 110,

Concord's true picture shineth in this art,  
Where divers men and women ranked be,  
And every one doth dance a several part,  
Yet all as one in measure do agree,  
Observing perfect uniformity;  
All turn together, all together trace,  
All together honour and embrace.

(St. 110)

All honour and embrace except Romeo and Tybalt, who dance not.<sup>4</sup> And as Tillyard points out, Davies concludes *Orchestra* with a description of a dance at Queen Elizabeth's court, "symbolizing the orderly disposition of the body politic" (*O*, p. 12), microcosm to the dancing cosmos, and parallel to Verona's body politic in Shakespeare's play.

Over sixty years before Davies' poem, Sir Thomas Elyot drew the same symbolism from dancing as Davies had: "In every dance, . . . there danseth together a man and a woman, holding each other by the hand or arm, which betokeneth concord."<sup>5</sup> Elyot goes on to anatomize the separate movements of dancing for the moral lessons to be learned from each. He entitles Chapter 22 of Book I, "How dancing may be an introduction unto the first moral virtue, called prudence"—a virtue both Romeo and Tybalt would have done well to practise—and then examines individual steps. "The first move . . . is called honour," a showing of proper reverence and respect, the lack of which infects the play. Neither house honours Prince Escalus' command for peace, the lovers do not sufficiently respect their elders' wishes or advice, and Capulet fails to respect Juliet's objection to marrying Paris.

. . . The second motion, which is two in number, may be signified celerity and slowness: which two, albeit they seem to discord in their effects and natural properties: and therefore they may be well resembled to the brawl in dancing (for in our English tongue we say men do brawl, when between them is altercation in words), yet of them two spring an excellent virtue . . . Maturity.

Maturity is a mean between two extremes, wherein nothing lacketh or exceedeth. . . . I can no other way interpret it in English, but speed thee slowly. (pp. 97-8)

"Speed thee slowly," *festina lente* in Latin, or as Friar Lawrence puts it:

Wisely and slow. They stumble that run fast. (II, iii, 94)

Too swift arrives as tardy as too slow. (II, vi, 15)<sup>6</sup>

Maturity, moderation, measure (a word much punned on in Acts I and II),<sup>7</sup> these are the qualities lacking in most of the characters in *Romeo and Juliet*. Let me insert here that I do not see the whole play as simply a lesson in prudence. As others have said before me, part of the play's fascination is that the sins of impetuosity and imprudence are, paradoxically, the basis for grand passion of the young lovers. But order is one of Shakespeare's most constant themes, whether figured by Lovejoy's chain of being or by the dances of *Romeo and Juliet*; and I suggest that the violations of order committed by Romeo and Tybalt in the play are foreshadowed by their not dancing in I, v.

To the contrary, what they do engage in is an anti-dance, a dance of disorder and death, a duel. Shakespeare several times has linked dancing and swords. In *Titus Andronicus* (II, i, 39) Demetrius speaks of Chiron's "dancing rapier"; in *All's Well* (II, i, 32-3), Bertram complains of "no sword worn / But one to dance with"; and in *Antony and Cleopatra* (III, xi, 35-36), Antony denounces Octavius as one who "at Philippi kept / His sword e'en like a dancer. . . ." In *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio describes Tybalt's style of fencing in terms that suggest accompaniment by music: "He fights as you sing prick-song—keeps time, distance, and proportion; he rests his minim rests" (II, iv, 20-22). In III, i, he challenges to make Tybalt dance. According to the latest articles on fencing styles in this play, Tybalt's style was essentially Spanish, as set forth by Don Jeronimo de Carranza in his *Filosofia de las Armas* (1569), rather than sword and buckler, as earlier critics have suggested. Among the proofs offered are Mercutio's insulting comments that Tybalt is a "courageous Captain of compliments, / A gentleman of the first and second cause" (II, iv, 21-28), and that he is "a villain that fights by the book of arithmetic" (III, i, 95).<sup>8</sup> Carranza's *Philosophy* contained a section on the punctilio of duelling, as did the text of the Italian fencing master Vincentio Saviolo; but Carranza alone, before Shakespeare's time, emphasized the causes for fencing. Also, the Spanish style of fencing was based on geometry, laying a circle on the floor and marking it into precise, "arithmetic" sections; fencers were taught to move around this circle to "'complement' the movements of an imaginary opponent."<sup>9</sup> More to the point, George Silver, a contemporary of Shakespeare, described those who used the Spanish manner of fence as having "their feet continually moving, as if they were in a dance."<sup>10</sup> And finally, John Florio, in his language book *Second Fruits*, puffs his countryman Saviolo, praising both his fencing ability and his dancing.<sup>11</sup>

Thus we can see fencing associated with dancing in Shakespeare's mind by their similarity in movement and sometimes training, and also by language. I have quoted Mercutio's musical description of Tybalt's fencing, but there are other words that call both activities to mind. "Measure" is not only the name of a virtue neglected by the main characters of the play, it is also a musical term—the dance the maskers expect at the Capulets'—and a term in fencing. Thus instead of treading a measure, Tybalt and Mercutio, and Romeo and Tybalt measure swords. Similarly, Mercutio's list of fencing terms used by Tybalt—*passado* (lunge) and *punto reverso* (backhanded thrust)—concludes with "the hay" (II, iv, 27), usually glossed as synonymous with *touché* and derived from the Italian *hai*, you have it. However, these terms follow the musical ones quoted above; and the hay, like the measure and brawl, is an English dance.<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of what Shakespeare may have thought about settling individual grudges with a sword, we know that toward the end of Elizabeth's reign not just duelling but even rapiers themselves proved a nuisance. John Stow records that

he was held the greatest Gallant, that had the deepest Ruffe and longest Rapier: the offence to the Eye of the one, and the hurt unto the life of the Subject, that came by the other, caused her Majesty to make Proclamation against them both and to place Selected grave Citizens at every gate, to cut the Ruffes and break the Rapiers points of all passengers that exceeded a yeard in length of their Rapiers. . . .<sup>13</sup>

Finally James I banned duelling in 1613 with his *Proclamation against private Challenges and Combats*.<sup>14</sup> Few judicial trials of arms occur in Shakespeare's play: we see the preliminaries of one in the opening scenes of *Richard II*, witness a mock one between Hector and Ajax in IV, v, of *Troilus and Cressida*, and do see formal challenge and combat between Horner and Peter in *2 Henry VI* and between Edgar and Edmund at the end of *King Lear*. The rest of Shakespeare's references to the code duello are satirical, like Armado's remarks concluding Act I of *Love's Labour's Lost*, Sir Toby's advice to Sir Andrew Aguecheek (*Twelfth Night*, III, iv, 33-54 and III, iv, 193-200), Mercutio's sneers at Tybalt's first and second causes, and Touchstone's disquisition on those same causes (*As You Like It*, V, iv, 69-108). It is perhaps no accident that two of these three mentions of duelling are ridiculed in comedies.

In contrast, Shakespeare frequently uses dancing as a show of solemnity or, as Elyot said, of concord, to end plays amicably that had begun less so. Thus we have "dancing measures" concluding *As You Like It*, a masque cele-

brating the union of Ferdinand and Miranda in *The Tempest*, foreshadowing the play's happy conclusion, and dances at the end of *Much Ado*, and *Midsummer Night's Dream*.<sup>15</sup> Dancing is a sign of harmony and amity, of things and people in proper order, moving temperately, with measure. Duelling is the opposite. It is intemperate, a sign of disorder and a frequent cause of still more. Thus Romeo and Tybalt's lack of participation in "grave and solemn measures . . . / With such fair order and proportion true . . ." (*Orchestra*, St. 65), is, I believe, a sign that they will not avail themselves of

logic [that] leadeth reason in a dance;  
 (Reason, the cynosure and bright lodestar  
 In this world's sea, t' avoid the rocks of chance).  
 (*Orchestra*, St. 94)

Instead they fight in an unreasonable anti-dance, becoming victims of chance and figures in a dance of death.

## NOTES

1. Arthur Brooke, "The Tragicall Historye of Romeus & Juliet," *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Geoffrey Bullough, ed. (London, 1957), I, 291-294, ll. 197-310, also p. 270.
2. *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London, 1960), p. 94. Quotations in the text will be from this edition.
3. *Orchestra, or A Poem of Dancing*, ed. E. M. W. Tillyard (London, 1947). Quotations in the text will be from this edition. Those from Tillyard's introductory remarks will be marked by the letter *O*, to distinguish them from quotations taken from his *Elizabethan World Picture*.
4. See Allison Gaw's "The Impromptu Mask in Shakespeare," *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, XI (1936), 149-60, for a discussion of the staging of I, v, and of those who do partake in the dance. Mercutio dances, but does not "honour and embrace" Tybalt, who does not. Staging of the play can and has emphasized the parallel between abstaining from the dance and being separate from the social world formed by it.
5. *The Booke Named the Governour* (1531; London, 1907), intro. Foster Watson, p. 94. All references in the text are to this edition. I have modernized Elyot's spellings somewhat throughout the quoted passages.
6. Cf. Gordon Ross Smith, "The Balance of Themes in *Romeo and Juliet*," *Essays on Shakespeare*, ed. Gordon Ross Smith (University Park, Pa., 1965), p. 19.
7. Cf. A. Forbes Sieveking, "Dancing," *Shakespeare's England*, ed. Raleigh Lee, et al. (London, 1916), II, 442-3. "Upon few subjects does Shakespeare more persistently expend his punning propensity than upon dancing names and terms current in his day, like measure, brawl. . . ."

8. Adolph L. Soens, "Tybalt's Spanish Fencing in *Romeo and Juliet*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, XX (Spring 1969), pp. 121-127, esp. p. 124.  
See also Horace S. Craig, "Dueling Scenes and Terms in Shakespeare's Plays," *University of California Publications in English*, IX (1942), pp. 1-28, esp. pp. 14-17.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
10. *Paradoxes of Defence* (London, 1599; reprinted Amsterdam, 1968), p. 14. While we are discussing puns between fencing and other activities, let me cite Romeo's excuse for not dancing (I, iv, 14-15): "You have dancing shoes / With nimble soles. I have a soul of lead. . . ." Silver quotes the exercises prescribed by Elizabethan England's first Italian master of the fence: "Signior Rocko . . . taught the Noblemen & Gentlemen of the Court; he caused some of them to weare leaden soales in their shoes, the better to bring them to nimbleness of feet in their fight" (p. 64).
11. *Florios Second Frvtes* (London, 1591; Amsterdam, 1969), p. 119.
12. Cf. Sieveking, pp. 440-442 and *Orchestra*, stanzas 47, 53, 64, 106.
13. John Stow, *Annales*, continued by Edmund Howes (London, 1631), p. 869.
14. Sieveking, pp. 405-406.
15. As for the dance in *Henry VIII*, I, iv—if the design of the play is Shakespeare's—we can at least say for this dance that it was responsible for Elizabeth, "a happy conclusion." The several procession in the play (II, iv; IV, i; and V, v all emphasize the theme of order and proper place.