

« Then love - devouring death do what he dare »:
the immeasurable margin in Romeo and Juliet
by
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Romeo and Juliet is overwhelmingly a tragedy, though not in the Aristotelian sense: As the Prince of Verona observes at the very end of the play;

*... never was a story of more woe
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo*

(V,iii,308-9)

and this description refers to the calamitous nature of the action which, dictated by Fate, leads the lovers down to death. The Chorus outlines the essentials of the plot in the first 11 lines. Tragedy in the sense of an unhappy tale having a miserable conclusion, to which the protagonists are brought without necessary reference to morality or justice, was unsatisfactory to Christians, who expected a connection between conduct and outcome. But mediaeval tragedy was no more than an account of striking incidents of dire misfortune caused by impersonal Fate, which could prove disastrous to guilty and innocent alike. The well - known story, told by Dante and Chaucer,⁽¹⁾ of Ugolino, Count of Pisa, forced by starvation to eat his children, was both pitiful and horrible, but not «moral» and the same may be said for most of the narratives in **The Monk's Tale**, which simply illustrate the harshness of the material world. The «double sorrow» of **Troilus and Criseyde** is referred to as a tragedy⁽²⁾ but it is a love tragedy, leading to mental torment and not to physical death. Justice is not involved, nor are the lovers flawed except in the sense that all humankind was thought to be a product of original sin. Chaucer's «retraction» in Book V enjoining «young fresh folk» to reject earthly vanity and mistrust **eros** along with all ephemeral things points up the moral⁽³⁾

The mythical conjunction of love and death, **Liebestod**, helps to focus the emotions in **Romeo and Juliet**,⁽⁴⁾ since the pair are not to be blamed for their predicament, and their behaviour, marked by impetuosity, is understandable in «young, fresh folk». They are not plunged into a moral dilemma, as

Brutus or Hamlet are, nor are they struggling for an earthly prize, like Macbeth, nor to maintain a personal concept of honour, like Othello or Lear, nor can their relationship be associated with failure to fulfil obligations, as Antony's can as he is ensnared by Cleopatra.

Love in this play denotes life and, like life, it is easily destroyed, though capable of great strength and power of resistance. This is a paradox central to understanding not only of **Romeo and Juliet** but of the renaissance conception of love in general. In **A Midsummer Night's Dream**, Lysander observes that love is «Brief as the lightning in the collied night» (I,i,145),⁽⁵⁾ while Hamlet refers to the Prologue of the play-within-the-play by capping Ophelia's comment:

Hamlet. *Is this a prologue, or the posy of a ring?*

Ophelia. *'Tis brief, my lord.*

Hamlet. *As woman's love.*

(III,ii,149-51)

Even the seemingly enduring love of Antony and Cleopatra is transitory, since nothing, not even the most violent earthly passion, transcends death. The marriage scene of **Romeo and Juliet** (II,vi) is short (37 lines). Romeo speaks of the «one short minute» of joy which no amount of sorrow can outweigh and assures Friar Laurence»

Do thou but close our hands with holy words,

Then love-devouring death do what he dare:

It is enough I may but call her mine.

(sc. cit, 6-8)

But the Friar's reply, already cited, shows that he is less confident as to the outcome. The language, in sound and meaning, reflects this uncertainty and throughout the play is designed to denote the incompatibility of the lovers' passions with the reality of the situation in Verona. Romeo's words in the balcony scene:

I am no pilot, yet wert thou as far

As that vast shore wash'd with the farthest sea,

I should adventure for such merchandise

(II,ii,82-4)

and to be echoed in his last speech:

Thou desperate pilot now at once run on.

The dashing rocks thy seasick weary bark.

(V,iii,117-8)

while Juliet's vow «to follow thee my lord throughout the world» if she becomes his wife is ironic in view of the shortness of time allowed before her death.

The «star-cross'd lovers» are young, inexperienced in the ways of the world as they know it and in the grip of powerful passions which cause them to spurn the advice of common-sense when it fails to echo the dictates of their feelings of the moment. Yet the audience is always on their side, for unlike other tragic heroes conceived by Shakespeare they display no unpleasant qualities nor indulge in selfish outbursts. The self-interest of lovers is not of this kind and can be benevolently regarded by outsiders, tolerated with a smile as a curious phenomenon, one source of comedy. Bergson's theory of rigidity as the root of the comic holds up here. Such tolerance is grounded in knowledge of the old feud between the Montagues and the Capulets upon which such stress is laid in the course of the opening Act. By the time scene V is ended, Romeo and Juliet have seen each other, fallen victims to Cupid's dart and identified each other as members of the rival houses. The Chorus which opens Act II brings events up to date and gathers the known facts together but in subsequent Acts there is no need of a Chorus.

By the end of Act II the lovers are conspiring to get married, with the aid of Friar Laurence and the Nurse. Speed is of the essence. No time is lost. No hesitations retard their actions. Neither has any doubts as to the rightness of what they plan to do, nor does Shakespeare spend time and effort in describing the course of their love-affaire, as Chaucer does of Troilus and Criseyde's. It is instantaneous, a fiery comet, fated to burn itself out. **Macbeth** hurries to its inevitable conclusion in much the same way, gathering momentum, with the hero unable to change course after Duncan's murder. In **Romeo and Juliet** the irrevocable step is taken when Friar Laurence agrees to marry the couple in the hope that this union would end the vendetta:

*In one respect I'll thy assistant be,
For this alliance may so happy prove.
To turn your households' rancour to pure love*

(II,iii,86-8)

whereupon Romeo cannot wait and is cautioned by the Friar not to proceed too hastily. In scene vi, Laurence reveals his doubts as to the outcome and repeats his injunction to Romeo:

*These violent delights have violent ends.
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,
Which as they kiss consume. The sweetest honey*

*Is loathsome in his own deliciousness,
And in the taste confounds the appetite.
Therefore love moderately; long love doth so.
Too swift arrives as tardy as too slow.*

(sc cit., 9-15)

and the stage direction following states: «Enter JULIET somewhat fast and embraces Romeo». The language and induced atmosphere suggests pressure, over-hastiness, intervals of dissolving time and rapid movement. Much has been written on time-sequences in this play⁽⁶⁾ and indeed they are important when it comes to the fatal outcome in the tomb but in the private world of intimate physical passion time is meaningless. Only in the real environment of Verona is it significant; unfortunately, Romeo and Juliet are of that world even if their romantic aspirations take them out of it. Real and ideal are in conflict, a process which is progressively more obvious in **The Merchant of Venice** and **Twelfth Night** and is appropriately symbolized by the Forest of Arden in **As You Like It**.

Real time is against the lovers. The actual time of the events is short. Scholars have worked out that they knew each other for a few hours only but this is not particularly important. The impact is made when timed events, dates, arrangements to meet and other human concerns with chronology are set against the timing of inorganic nature—sun, moon, stars, dawn to dark. Time and its corollary, change, regarded by theologians as one essential indication of the presence of evil, have no part in the lovers' world, an idealised universe where all is joy and will endure forever. Yet Shakespeare makes the obligations of Verona society crowd them as soon as they recognise who and what they have found. With Romeo's

*Is she a Capulet?
O dear account. My life is my foe's debt*

(I,v,117-8)

and Juliet's

*My only love sprung from my only hate.
Too early seen unknown, and known too late.*

(ibid., 137-8)

they are stripped of illusion. But they seek to be free and this is their tragedy. Their kind of freedom is not possible in the world which they inhabit.

In III, i, Romeo kills Tybalt in a street brawl,⁽⁷⁾ This is the climax and it abruptly changes the play's direction. Romeo has broken the law and, according to the Duke's ruling in I,i, is condemned to death. Moreover, the old feud is touched off once again, for here is a Capulet dead, slain by a Montague. The quarrel grows in a series of outbursts until all are drawn into a scene of disorder. The Duke is fair, however. Romeo is to be banished from the state, a fate then considered to be a fate worse than death. Thus Juliet is left in a moral dilemma, for the man she has sworn to marry has killed her own kinsman Tybalt. She threatens suicide :

*I'll to my wedding-bed,
And death, not Romeo take my maidenhead.*

(III, iii, 136-7)

In parallel, Romeo cries that he would rather die.

*And say'st thou that exile is not death?
Hadst thou no poison mix'd, no sharp-ground knife,
No sudden mean of death, though ne'er so mean,
But 'banished' to kill me?*

(*ibid.* 43-6)

high-flown rhetoric which Laurence does not take seriously. Neither of the lovers is in earnest at this point but almost immediately she is told that she must marry Paris - the Thursday following is agreed in a rush and Juliet's feelings are not considered by her enraged father. The Nurse advises her to make the best of it as Paris is «a lovely gentleman» and Romeo as good as dead so far as Juliet is concerned. It is now that her resolve is steeled. She must find a way out or take her own life. Her rebellion is complete at the end of Act III.

Laurence offers a solution, «a kind of hope». She is desperate enough to accept any remedy proposed, as her wild talk reveals.

*O, bid me leap, rather than marry Paris,
From off the battlements of any tower,
Or walk in thievish ways, or bid me lurk.
Where serpents are. Chain me with roaring bears,
Or hide me nightly in a charnel-house
O'ercover'd quite with dead men's rattling bones,
With reeky shanks and yellow chapless skulls.
Or bid me go into a new-made grave,*

*And hide me with a dead man in his shroud-
Things that, to hear them told, have made me tremble-
And I will do it without fear or doubt,
To live an unstain'd wife to my sweet love.⁽⁸⁾*

(IV, i, 77-88)

This prepares the ground for the violent contrast in mood when Juliet's apparently dead body is discovered. Juliet, a girl in love, is a blatant dissembler, ready to deceive her family and to subordinate all else to her own wants-later Desdemona shows herself to be made of the same stuff, although in her case a greater maturity has added a certain calculating quality which is absent from the child Juliet's personality. Desdemona knew what she was doing and her decision over her «divided duty» is taken, as she explains, deliberately and as a result of logical thought about which course of action is the right one for her. Desdemona is not led, she leads, whereas Juliet is in the hands of her fate, supported by her dreams and her innocence. For her the margin between life and death is narrow and, further, she knows little about either.

IV,v is highly emotional and painted with stark images of death, typical of the baroque style associated later with Webster and Tourneur, but less concrete - death is referred to as the ravager, the old cruel tyrant of late-mediaeval verse and the **Danse Macabre** murals, the all-powerful assassin having no mercy and, in this case, the adulterer, for as Capulet says to Paris:

*O son, the night before thy wedding day
Hath Death lain with thy wife. There she lies,
Flower as she was, deflowered by him.
Death is my son-in-law, Death is my heir.
My daughter he hath wedded, I will die,
And leave him all: life, living, is all Death's*

(sc. cit., 35-40)

and later he relates death to time, another familiar association in renaissance literature and art.

*Uncomfortable time, why cam'st thou now
To murder, murder our solemnity?⁽⁹⁾*

(ibid., 60-1)

Shakespeare's art is such as to conceal much of this **grotesquerie** from the audience, letting them make their own mental pictures of the dire horror of mortality. This is particularly evident in Act V. His audience is forced to concentrate on the continuous action and to pass over the more glaring absurdities and excesses which bring the play dangerously close to the edge of farce. The baroque imagery is unleashed in scene iii, set in the churchyard, which places all principal characters on stage. In some respects, it presages the burial - ground scene in **Hamlet**, when Hamlet and Laertes brawl in Ophelia's grave. Romeo and Paris fight when the latter tries to arrest him and Romeo kills him - like Hamlet, Romeo is not averse to killing when his quick emotions are aroused, though the resemblance between him and the introspective hero of Elsinore ends there, as does Juliet's to Desdemona's, already noted. Romeo is no prey to logic - he reacts and plunges on ahead, fired by the spirit of youth and enterprise with little fear of consequences. His opening speech in Act V is full of optimism and when he gets the ill news from Balthasar about Juliet's supposed death, he enthusiastically prepares for his own by procuring poison from the apothecary. His decision to leave the material world is taken immediately.

*Come, cordial, and not poison, go with me
To Juliet's grave, for there must I use thee.*

(*ibid.*, ii, 85-6)

The intervention of fate - the plague, another image of death, ensures that Romeo and Juliet miss each other by a full half-hour so that Romeo dies from the poison, as he intended, but without ever knowing that his beloved is not really dead. Juliet, waking, is left to stab herself and the rest of the scene is devoted to recapitulation. The heads of the two families are left to set up the two golden statues as «poor sacrifices of our enmity», as Capulet puts it (*ibid.*, iii,303) This resolves the conflict which in the Prince's words become history. It is hinted that justice will be done to the survivors - Friar Laurence, for example, is to some degree culpable, as are the Nurse and the Apothecary - but the chief punishment is the continued memory of what this family feud led to, namely, death.

From the very start of **Romeo and Juliet** the audience is given explicit hints of the coming of death although Acts I, II and III are more in the nature of comedy than of tragedy. Tragedy is clearly established in Acts IV and V, though, like **King Lear**, the play has been recast with a happy ending in which the lovers both survive the blows of fate. Shakespeare's play, as first conceived from Arthur Brooke's poem,⁽¹⁰⁾ is an elaborate morality of which the lesson is pressed home in action. In comic terms, marry in haste, repent at

leisure - except that the lovers were given no opportunity to repent. Regarded as a tragedy, age as opposed to youth, cold reason versus uncontrollable emotion, even as the individual resisting society's claims, the drama is unobtrusively didactic.

Whatever construction be put on it, the chill of death pervades **Romeo and Juliet**. The Chorus predicts it from line 5 of the first scene:

*From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life,
Whose misadventur'd piteous overthrows
Doth with their death bury their parents' strife*

(sc. cit.)

and this is immediately succeeded by a scene of «escalating» violent strife when Sampson and Gregory, both Capulet domestics and armed, are soon joined by Abram and Balthasar from the Montague camp. This encounter starts a fight between Sampson and Abram which is interrupted by Tybalt who fights with Benvolio. Finally the Citizens join in and the stage is crowded with antagonists, including the heads of the two warring households. The Prince halts the conflict and threatens further breachers of the peace with death.

One question which the play poses is the old one of predestination or free - will. Do the lovers fulfil the designs of an omniscient power or have they a choice? Is Death a chooser or is it chosen? The Prince has power of life or death over his subjects but does not choose to exercise it, although he utters threats. The lovers claim power over death and Juliet greets the news of Romeo's banishment with «And death, not Romeo take my maidenhead» (III, iii, 136-7, previously cited) and several other references to the theme of Death as her bridegroom suggest that the playwright wished to make it clear that Romeo had a rival who in the end triumphs over him. The play moves in and out of the realm of myth, for Shakespeare thought he was retelling a true story and it is the impingement of history on the **Liebestod** myth which fires the drama. **Liebestod** concludes in the lovers' suicide-pact, but his adapted tale is not to be taken as a myth.⁽¹¹⁾ Romeo and Juliet are optimistic, they hope to survive. Suicide as a way out is not tragic in itself but rather an expression of human defeat. These lovers, unlike, for example, Antony and Cleopatra, who seek death at different times and with different motives, or Troilus and Criseyde, whose love is not shared equally and who do not die physically because of it, aim to transcend death. The audience is neither satisfied by the working - out of the pure myth nor repelled by the calamitous

outcome of the historical account which Shakespeare learned about from his sources.

Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy is shot through with images of death and graveyard horrors. From Sackville and Norton's **Gorboduc** to Fletcher's **Bonduca**, language, ideas and technique underwent a complex development and the attitude to death changes. Yet it is hard to sum up this change in a concentrated form, since all the playwrights resist general definition in terms of a death - vision – in fact, only Shakespeare may be said to express a unity of feeling regarding mortality.⁽¹²⁾ Yet the poetic drama of the Elizabethans enabled a much clearer personification of death to be presented than was ever the case in mediaeval morality plays wherein the impact was mainly visual. The Elizabethan and Jacobean poets welcomed death as a bringer of immortality and looked upon this life as amounting to a loss of which the final moments are only to be eagerly anticipated. Romeo's last speech:

*Here, here, will I remain
With worms that are thy chambermaids; Here
Will I set up my everlasting rest
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world - weary flesh*

(V, iii, 108-12)

is paralleled in later plays by other playwrights. Chapman's Clermont d'Ambois is a self - sufficient hero who attains his earthly object and finds death the only alternative to frustration:

*Rather than here live, ready every hour
To feed thieves, beasts and be the slave of power?
I come my lord!*

(The Revenge of Bussy, V, ii)

The mediaeval pride of life fails to satisfy, so he kills himself. In Webster's **White Devil**, a drama crowded with emotional death - images, Flamineo commands Vittoria and Zanche to shoot him, accompanying his instruction with ribald speculations as to his destination. This first death is a hoax, since the pistols are not loaded, but not long afterwards he really dies from a stab-wound and utters familiar baroque sentiments:

*We cease to grieve, cease to be fortune's slaves
Nay, cease to die, by dying.*

(op. cit. V, vi, 253-4)

This recognition of death's place as a complement to life helped renaissance man to understand life more profoundly, not because it was valuable in itself but rather because it lacked value.⁽¹³⁾ Death did not penetrate this life to such a crushing extent as to rob it of all joy by narrowing the human vision down to a contemplation of the grave alone, as the **Danse Macabre** and **ars moriendi** artists had done, or as Martin Luther had proposed when he naively described life as a battle with death; this was the revelation of the religious syncretists of the European new movement, associated with Pico della Mirandola, Ficino and the mystical humanists of the late 15th century who adopted the traditions of the Jewish Kabbalah, seeking a key to unlock the secrets of man and the universe.⁽¹⁴⁾ Their perspective was widened and the 17th century perceived in death both change and the release from change, a dissolution of the personality followed by possession of the soul by the One into which the individual dissolves - death becomes no more than the preliminary to a reshaping, and effective elevation from one form of existence to a higher form. Shakespeare was certainly affected by this mystical approach to the act of dying though his considerations are soon gripped by the sadness brought on by a sense of life's futility, as is felt by Hamlet and later by Leontes in **The Winter's Tale**. Leontes makes sardonic observations about life being really death, a condition best described in terms of vacancy and emptiness, a meaningless pilgrimage which, if at times sensually enjoyable, is in itself worthless. The fury in his speech increases as he recites his catalogue of «nothingness», concluding with

*Why then the world and all that's in't is nothing
The covering sky is nothing; Bohemia nothing
My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings,
If this be nothing*

(op. cit. I, ii, 293-6)

representing the maturer Shakespeare's efforts to define this haunting insecurity.

The baroque poets regarded death as partaking of good as well as of terrifying aspects. It was a haven of rest and thus its prospect could be viewed with less tension than in the days of the old horrors. Man's experience of the material world had increased and gave him an uplift, a chance against death's complete destruction. In the perspective of history this may be seen

as a battle between death and life. Deep moral earnestness lies at the root of their contemplation of life in a suffering, struggling, incomprehensible universe fraught with anguish but equally painful however is their vision of being torn away from life and given up to something else, the «undiscovered country» feared by Hamlet. For this generation of poets and artists death is the only certainty and it assumes a metaphysical character which threatens of the grave and its traditional attributes do not obliterate; Death takes on the appearance of a welcome visitor, to be a terror only in the form which it might adopt - disease, violence, slaughter on the battlefield (war was condemned by humanists from Sir Thomas More onwards) and starvation were the real enemies of mankind, far more repugnant than the act of dying.

After about 1600, literature and art could present no fresh death - delineated shape, along with its ironical quality as the annihilator of all that man might build for himself, and dissolved into a shadowy abstraction which man's individual mental powers could overcome.⁽¹⁵⁾ Death represented a middle point between finite and infinite, for, if man could become God, or a God, death of the body was minor, a stage on the journey to perfection, even a symbol of the attainment of one-ness with the universal. Death had no reality, and was simply an essence of nature and in the nature of things.

It is hardly surprising that baroque art, with its predilection for the abnormal, raised the act of dying to a symbolic, mystical level; Bernini's **Ecstasy of St. Theresa**, designed in marble, a remarkable portrait of religious joy, embodies erotic delight in the throes of death.⁽¹⁶⁾ Romeo's final words catch something of this sensual yearning.⁽¹⁷⁾ He believes Juliet to be dead and looks upon her body before taking the poison:

*Eyes, look your last,
Arms, take your last embrace! And lips, O you
The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss
A dateless bargain to engrossing Death*

(V, iii, 112-15)

and then states his rejection of life in the conventional metaphor, already cited:

*Thou desperate pilot now at once run on
The dashing rocks thy seasick weary bark.*

(*ibid.* 117-8)

When Juliet realises the situation and determines to follow him, she does so after a kiss:

*I will kiss thy lips
Haply some poison yet doth hang on them
To make me die with a restorative.
Thy lips are warm!*

(ibid., 164-7)

The margin between life and death is immeasurable, even though the physical body has not yet lost its vital warmth;⁽¹⁸⁾ in fact, at lines 174 and 196 Shakespeare makes further references to the lovers' corpses as «warm». He offers no optimistic sentimental image of death as sleep, as many courtly lyricists in the Petrarchan tradition habitually did in order to minimise the finality of the transition.⁽¹⁹⁾ The two golden statues are raised to keep their memories alive «whiles Verona by that name is known» (1.199) and «the fearful passage of their death - mark'd love» which the Chorus stated was to be the theme of the play is left as a hoped-for guarantee of immortality⁽²⁰⁾.

NOTES:

All quotations and textual references to **Romeo and Juliet** relate to the Arden edition, ed. Brian Gibbons (London 1980).

1. Dante, **Inferno** xxxii - iii; Chaucer, **Monk's Tale**, stanzas. 53 - 9.
2. Chaucer, **op.cit.**, V.stanza 256 etc. of his translation of Boethius, II, prose ii, to which he appended a definition of tragedy as a tale of temporary prosperity ending in wretchedness. This was the first use of the word «**tragedy**» in English.
3. **op.cit.**, stanza 263
4. A contemporary audience would have accepted Romeo and Juliet as historical figures and there was a contemporary case (Cf Arden edn.31, n.2) but at least one modern critic thinks that Shakespeare came close in this play to describing the **Liebestod** condition (see Lawrence Lerner, **Love and Marriage: Literature and the Social Order** (London 1997), 55-7.
5. Juliet likens love to «lightning» (II,ii,119) and Romeo talks of «a lightning before death».
6. Cf Arden edn. 52f and 54n for a succinct account (see n.8 **infra**).

7. It makes tragedy inevitable.
8. Death is exhibited in Marlowe's **Tamburlaine** by the skilful use of metaphor and characterised as «imperious», «ugly», «eyeless monster», associated with war, rapine and the effortless conquests of the hero. Marlowe also recalls its mediaeval image as a vestibule to heffilfire. Juliet's «whirling words» are typical of the baroque.
9. The theme of Time was for the Elizabethans the most pressing, even more than that of Death, since Time was a constant reminder of the futility of all human action. Macbeth's «Tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow» speech (V,v,19-28) embodies all that these generations feared and mistrusted (cf n. *infra.*) Frederick Turner, **Shakespeare and The Nature of Time** (Oxford 1971) contains a full examination.
10. cf Arden edn., 32ff and in detail, with Brooke's text, of **The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet**, G. Bullough, **Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare** (London 1957-75 vols) I, 269-83 and (text) 284-363.
11. cf M.M.Mahood, **Shakespeare's Wordplay** (London 1968), 59 and refer to Lerner, *op.cit.* ch. on «Love and Death».
12. Theodore Spencer, **Death and Elizabethan Tragedy, a Study of Convention and Opinion in the Elizabethan Drama** (Harvard 1936) may be referred to for more detailed study though it is now obviously dated. Spencer's book consists of two long introductory chapters on the mediaeval and early renaissance attitudes to death which the Elizabethans inherited, followed by three more on language, ideas and technique. His concluding chapter traces, chronologically, the attitude to death as illustrated in several important plays, **Tamburlaine, Hamlet, The White Devil, The Duchess of Malfi** and three plays of Chapman (**Bussy d'Ambois, Byron and The Revenge of Bussy**). The study is somewhat diffuse and it is to be doubted whether the author's detailed categories describe anything fresh.
13. The deepest and most fundamental spirit of the baroque was that of longing for the new life and one of its most distinctive aspirations is this direction of human longing towards the infinite, the unfathomable, the never-to-be-known, an impenetrability best summed up in death itself.

With maturity - what Shakespeare referred to in **Hamlet** and **King Lear** as «readiness» or «ripeness») life and death feed in the strong hope that death is a creative change, not a destruction for all time. Death affected the material but the spirit must surely survive, otherwise life and the whole of creation was just a nonsense, «a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing». The possibility that that this last might be true was not to be borne. See P. D. Kristeller, **The Renaissance View of Man** (New York 1971) for a scholarly, penetrating examination of contemporary attitudes.

14. The perspective of man's explorations was widened by the influence of Bruno and the Hermetists, whose quest for the soul's regeneration was undertaken at high personal risk, Bruno himself was burned for heresy in 1600. Hermetism had an immense but hitherto relatively uncharted influence on literature and art and certainly affected Leonardo, Bacon and Shakespeare in different ways. Cf. Frances Yates, **Giordano Bruno and the Hermetist Tradition** (London 1967), ch. 14.
15. Any material object could symbolize death (or grace) so that existing iconography with its regular established significances and equivalents lost its precision. Exact interpretations could no longer be placed upon works of art, which tended to become less articulate in established dogmatic terms. This tendency is clearly exemplified in Milton's **Paradise Lost** and in the poetry of Donne and the «metaphysicals»
16. Photographic reproduction in Kenneth Clark, **Civilization** (London 1969), 134 and see n.31 *infra*. St. Theresa desires death as the end, the joyous release and ineffable peace of life eternal.
17. The longing for ecstasy in annihilation is almost completely hidden in Shakespeare's tragedies, but for the contemporary intellectual, longing for death was the elevation of his innermost being. Bruno, Jacob Boehme, Paracelsus and their disciples each inclined to perceive life as a unity, with death the root of existence, the genesis of eternal freedom.
18. Note how, in his final speech, the images of vitality and mortality are beginning to merge into one another.
19. e.g. lines like Henry King's «Sleep on, my Love, in thy cold bed, Never to be disquieted» from «Exequy upon his wife.» **Romeo and Juliet** has

long been treated as the tragedy of a great romance, but the does not back away from the act of killing the physical, since it is by this very action that love is kept alive spiritually.

20. The effigies and the legend point to Shakespeare's ineffable symbol of reconciliation which he implies in this final gathering together of the threads. That of the Duke in **Measure for Measure** is of the same type and the ritual device goes back to the Greek **deus ex machina** and forward to Eliot's Eumenides in **The Family Reunion**. See A.M.Kinghorn, **The Rise of The English Drama to 1600** (Hythe 1983) p.13-14 (originally published as **Mediaeval Drama**, (London 1968).