*Romeo and Juliet* and the Courage of Love

Courage in the context of Shakespeare’s thought is best defined as willingness to bear pain in pursuit of the good. Shakespeare uses Mercutio’s deceptively frivolous Queen Mab speech to establish a hierarchy of suffering and desire: Mab, a sort of tyrannical fairy who seems to represent passion itself, merely “gallops o’er” courtiers and “tickles” parsons as they dream of “suit[s]” and “another benefice” respectively; but adopts a fiercer approach as she “driveth o’er a soldier’s neck,” making him dream of “cutting foreign throats” and drinking “healths five fadom deep,” while “fright[ing]” him with “drums in his ear;” before finally manifesting herself in an even more terrifying “hag”-like form to “maids,” whom she “presses” as they “lie on their backs…and learns them first to bear, making them women of good carriage” (1.4.70-94). The Mab speech implies that there is a precise correlation between depth of passion and intensity of suffering: whereas the courtiers and parsons live comfortable, painless lives because they have no strong desires to distract them from their prudent pursuit of self-advancement, spirited soldiers prioritise honour and camaraderie over their own safety, while at the apex of the hierarchy the pleasure of the passionate “maids” seems almost indistinguishable from the pain of their pregnancy and labour -in addition to its bawdy sense, Mab’s “press[ing]” could refer both to torture and military enlistment.

This speech is key to the argument of the play: just as the proud loyalty to peers and kin shown by Tybalt, the servants and Mercutio demands more courage than the prudent moderation of Benvolio, Lady Capulet and Friar Lawrence, so passion teaches the nurse, Capulet and the eponymous lovers to “bear” with various degrees of fortitude a still more arduous and enduring burden of labour and care. The pressure of the play’s tragic events not only serves to pinpoint each character’s position within the erotic hierarchy, but, as we shall see, to impel some of them to progress up the scale.

In the introductory section of the play Shakespeare explores the similarities between the passionate and spirited groups, but then distinguishes them sharply, both from each other and from the first group of phlegmatic, or stolid characters. The brawl with which the play opens has, in Romeo’s words, “much to do with hate, but more with love,” for it is the servants’ desire to show solidarity with Tybalt which finally impels them to come to blows (1.1.175, 1.1.1-59-63). Just as spirited tribal allegiances constitute a sort of love, so courtship requires a spirited assertiveness; whereas the servants use erotic language to express their loyal aggression, Romeo uses a military conceit to describe the way in which he has repeatedly “assail[ed]” and laid “siege” to the “well arm’d” Rosaline (1.1.208-14). There is no doubt that both derive their energy in part from their youthful libidos: Sampson and Gregory fantasise proudly about raping the Montague womenfolk, while even the gentler Romeo admits to making a desperate attempt to bribe his mistress to “ope her lap” (1.1.15-32, 1.1.214).

Romeo himself explores the parallel between the servants’ passion and his own, using a series of oxymoronic images– “heavy lightness, serious vanity…feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health”–which imply that the passion which sparks both the brawl and his own abortive courtship of Rosaline generates a commensurate level of pain, and therefore of courageous endurance (1.1.173-82). While the servants overcome their fear both of the law and of physical injury to prove their fidelity to their household “with purple fountains issuing from [their] veins,” Romeo has clearly been prepared to risk not only painful rejection, but ostracism from his family should his courtship have succeeded, for it would make no sense for him to blame Rosaline, for “cut[ing] beauty off from all posterity” if he has not been planning to marry her and father her children, regardless of the fact that she is a Capulet (1.1.33-63, 1.1.85, 1.1.215-20, 1.2.68-69). The pain which he is enduring when we first meet him is clearly without parallel in his previous experience, even if it is by no means as all-consuming as he believes (see below).

There are, however, significant contrasts between Romeo and the brawling servants, all of which stem from the former’s more intensely passionate nature. Whereas the servants are driven by traditional allegiances, Romeo’s desire for Rosaline clearly represents an autonomous erotic choice. Moreover, while the servants are encouraged by their relatively shallow, tribal loyalties to prove to their masters that they are not mere “colliers,” but spirited, “valiant” gentlemen in their own right with their own proud sense of honour, Romeo’s intense passion involves bravely exposing his neediness, and imposes a humble dependence on his beloved’s response to his advances (1.1.1-63, 1.4.19-26, 2.4.13-16). Far from flaunting his fidelity, like the servants, the passionate Romeo “pens himself” in his room and is generally:

…So secret and so close,

So far from sounding and discovery,

As is the bud bit with an envious worm.

(1.1.131-55)

Romeo has been left with no option other than to attempt to endure his pain in as patient a manner as possible: after initially attempting to avoid Benvolio, he then resists his sympathy, striving to hold back the tears which he fears that his cousin’s intervention might “propagate” (1.1.124-25, 1.1.186-89). Although his suffering is easy to mock, it arguably requires more courage than the servants’ spirited boldness: “for many a morning”–as Montague confirms–he has been silently enduring an inescapable “madness most discreet, a choking gall,” whereas the servants seem partly to relish the opportunity to swagger through “three civil brawls” in a spirit of proud camaraderie, despite their fear both of the law and of physical injury (1.1.131, 1.1.193-94, 1.1.89).

Nevertheless, although the intensity of this pain already reflects Romeo’s deeply passionate nature, both his passion and his suffering are clearly shallower than he realises at this early stage in his erotic development; as is shown by the way in which he readily interrupts his melancholic reflections to consider where to “dine” and to greet Capulet’s servant, and of course by the fact that he immediately forgets about his protestations of undying love for Rosaline as soon as he sees Juliet (1.1.173, 1.2.54-56, 1.5.41-53). This apparent fickleness does not, however, indicate that Shakespeare endorses Benvolio’s cynical dismissal of Romeo’s romantic affairs–as some critics too readily assume–but simply reflects the fact that his mistress’s coolness has restricted his passion to a superficial, physical attraction, which has of necessity been generated purely by “the precious treasure of…eyesight” (1.2.45-50, 1.2.82-99, 1.1.225-38). Although Romeo’s suffering at this point in the play is doubtless greater than he could previously have imagined possible, it is still only a dim foreshadowing of the pain of losing a fully reciprocated devotion. Nevertheless, even this abortive courtship teaches him to exercise a quiet humility which, judging by Mercutio’s incredulous scorn, is entirely novel: having learnt that he cannot satisfy his needs simply by making insistent demands, he adopts a much more moderate approach in his relationship with Juliet and so begins his progress up the erotic hierarchy.

In contrast with both the passionate and the spirited characters, Benvolio’s natural stolidity places him firmly with the courtiers in the first tier of Mab’s hierarchy: he avoids the pain of loss and the pangs of sympathy which passionate lovers are bound to feel as they strive to unite with their beloveds, and is not even sufficiently spirited to prioritise his allegiance to his family over his prudent conformity to the law (1.1.64-65). He offers Romeo his support purely out of a prudent respect for old Montague’s wishes, being content to “shun” him until the head of his family hints that he could help to discover the cause of his son’s depression (1.1.118-59). It is characteristic of Benvolio that he apparently has to stifle an urge to laugh before advising his friend coolly to “forget to think of” Rosaline; his bracing comment that “one fire burns out another’s burning,” just as “one pain is lessen’d by another’s anguish,” does indeed resemble the coarse remedy of a “plantan” root, just as Romeo claims, since it demonstrates that he is not at all interested in grappling with the intensity of his friend’s feeling (1.1.183, 1.1.225, 1.2.45-52).

Shakespeare concludes his introductory survey of Queen Mab’s three tiers–which we can now label as stolid, spirited and passionate respectively–by contrasting the three friends’ various motives for gate-crashing Capulet’s party: Benvolio and Mercutio both hope to use the party to distract Romeo from Rosaline, but whereas the former is, characteristically, concerned only to curb his melancholia, just as old Montague might wish, the latter focuses aggressively on restoring his own friendship with Romeo by rescuing him from the “mire” of passive servility into which he has recently fallen (1.4.41-43). Accordingly, while the unerotic and cautious Benvolio plans to “measure them a measure and be gone,” the spirited Mercutio insists that his friend must thoroughly immerse himself in the revels: he should “dance” freely, “borrow[ing] Cupid’s wings and soar[ing] with them above a common bound” (1.4.3-18).

Because of Romeo’s intensely passionate nature, he is simultaneously more spirited than Mercutio and more restrained than Benvolio in his approach to the masque. Like Queen Mab’s maids, but in contrast to Mercutio, who only hints at the depth of his attachment to his best friend, even though it is this which really drives his desperate efforts to distract him from his romantic affairs (see below), Romeo has bravely shouldered “love’s heavy burthen,” risking pain and humiliation by admitting his intense need for Rosaline: he eventually goes to the masque, despite his misgivings, in a spirit of desperate fatalism, knowing that he might incur a “vile forfeit of untimely death,” presumably simply in order to “rejoice” in his mistress’s “splendor” from afar (1.4.11-26, 1.4.106-13, 1.2.100-01). His decision to attend the party thus indicates that he is already disposed to prioritise his passion above his instinct for survival, and therefore above all lesser manifestations of self-love. At the same time Romeo’s suffering has fostered a capacity for sympathetic understanding and moderation which will serve him in good stead in his courtship of Juliet: having drawn the link between the pain of his rejection and the “brawling love,” or “loving hate” of the feud, he is much more reluctant than his more self-involved companions to inveigle himself into the party, since he can anticipate more clearly than they the intense mortification which the trick might cause (1.1.176).

Whereas the purpose of the opening section of the play is to outline the three groups which make up the erotic hierarchy, the main story is designed to enable the attentive reader to gauge the exact position of each character in the scale of passion and courageous endurance. This essay will aim to do this, starting with Benvolio, who is surely the least erotic character, since he seems to be the only one who remains completely unmoved by the events of the play, and moving up through the erotic hierarchy. Benvolio’s characteristic caution is implicit in Mercutio’s bantering accusation that he is an inveterate quarreller, and evident in his increasingly desperate attempts to restrain his swaggering friend from goading the Capulets into a dangerous brawl (3.1.1-33, 3.1.50-53). He shows a typically prudent respect for authority when he conceals from the prince that it was his kinsman who initially challenged Tybalt to a duel, while doing what he can to present the latter’s actions in the worst light possible and to exonerate Romeo, no doubt in just the way that old Montague would wish (3.1.152-86). Benvolio’s pervasive affability, implicit in his name, is a sign that he is too unemotional to suffer the pain which passionate attachments inevitably inflict, as is suggested by the fact that he shows no trace of grief for Mercutio’s death, and indeed vanishes from the play completely as soon as the tragic events start to unfold. The fact that even he is depressed at the start of the play may well furnish the best possible evidence for the universality of Queen Mab’s rule (1.1.126-30).

Lady Capulet’s hasty request for the nurse’s support in the task of informing Juliet of Paris’s suit suggests that she is as detached from her daughter as Benvolio is from his friends (1.3.7-9). Her references to “gold clasps” and “precious book[s]” which “lack…a cover” imply that her concern is purely for the status and wealth which marriage to Paris is likely to provide (1.3.87-92). Later she reprimands her husband for being “mad” and “hot” as he is excoriating Juliet, while at the same time coolly dismissing her daughter as a “fool” for refusing such an advantageous match: “Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee” (3.5.157, 3.5.175, 3.5.140, 3.5.202-03). Lacking the intransigent constancy of deep passion, she seems to have conformed more readily than her daughter to the demands of social convention, having apparently resigned herself to a prudent, arranged marriage with a husband much older than herself (compare 1.3.71-73 and 1.5.30-40). In contrast with Lady Montague, who dies from “grief of [her] son’s exile,” and with her own husband–see below–she is too self-involved to mourn Juliet with the intensity that a more deeply sympathetic bond would have inspired, but does bitterly lament her own loss of a “loving child…to rejoice and solace in,” declaring later that her daughter’s death “warns [her] old age to a sepulchre” (5.3.210-11, 4.5.43-48, 5.3.206-07). Although Lady Capulet is one the least emotional characters in the play, these pangs of self-pity, alongside her unexpectedly spirited reaction to Tybalt’s death, suggest that even she is more passionate than the almost entirely phlegmatic Benvolio (3.5.78-92).

Friar Lawrence should also be ranked in Queen Mab’s first group, which is initially exemplified by parsons as well as courtiers (1.4.77-81). Whereas passion itself teaches the “maids” to “bear” and be “of good carriage,” the friar believes that the “rude will” of fallen man needs to be restrained by God’s “grace,” just as the medicinal use of herbs must be carefully regulated, since some are therapeutic “being smelt,” but harmful if “tasted” (2.3.15-30). He assumes that “violent delights have violent ends,” unless one deliberately “love[s] moderately,” because he sees romantic passion as primarily sexual, rooted in the “eyes,” and thus has no confidence in the moderation which, as we shall see, is generated naturally in intimate relationships by an exchange of a purely secular “grace for grace” (2.6.9-15, 2.3.65-84, 2.3.86). Friar Lawrence’s failure to understand Romeo’s portrayal of love as a mutual “wound[ing]” which can only be cured by a lasting union, hints that, despite his mockery of his interlocutor’s fickleness, it is he himself who cannot appreciate absolutely unconditional constancy (2.3.48-56).[[1]](#endnote-13) His charitable determination to turn the “households’ rancor to pure love” by marrying Romeo and Juliet (2.3.90-92), which springs from Christian principles rather than compassionate feeling, ultimately proves to be less durable than the sympathetic rapport which the lovers share, as we shall see.

Like Benvolio, but in contrast with the nurse, who is affected so deeply by Juliet’s grief over Romeo’s exile that it “make[s] [her] old,” the phlegmatic friar does not suffer in sympathy with his protégé, having presumably himself never experienced passionate attachment or loss: “thou canst not speak of that thou dost not feel” (3.3.88-89, 3.3.64-70). At first he attempts to “dispute” with Romeo about his banishment before the latter can even bear to hear the painful topic mentioned, but the bitter ferocity of his interlocutor’s response to his initial attempt to administer “adversity’s sweet milk, philosophy”–seems to force him to change his usual approach: instead of arguing against “violent delights,” as we might have expected, he promises in the end that the joy of the lovers’ reunion will be “twenty hundred thousand times more than [their] lamentation,” while urging Romeo to “ascend [Juliet’s] chamber…and comfort her” (3.3.24-63, 3.3.146-58).

This painful conversation seems to undermine the friar’s confidence in the value of reason and moderation. He feels an unexpected pang of sympathy as he listens to Juliet’s parallel outburst of grief later on in the play–it “strains me past the compass of my wits” (4.1.46-47)–which drives him to develop an uncharacteristically succinct and practical plan for her to simulate suicide. Ironically, he now uses his very skill in tempering poisonous herbs to facilitate passions that he has previously censured as intemperate, while showing a new-found faith in the power of Juliet’s passion to generate a courageous constancy which he hopes will override any “womanish fear” that might “abate [her] valor” (4.1.89-120). Thus, the friar becomes one of several characters in the play to move up the erotic scale as he begins to shoulder the burden of care which a sympathetic attachment is bound to impose. Nevertheless, there is no evidence yet that he is willing to prioritise this bond of sympathy above his own interests, for it is Juliet who will actually carry out his dangerous plan, and, as she herself notes, the friar’s reputation will be protected even if she dies (4.3.24-27).

In attempting to console Juliet’s family after her apparent death the friar suggests that they should relish her “promotion” to heaven, since “’twas [their] heaven that she should be advanc’d” (4.5.71-72). Not only is Capulet completely unmoved by this line of reasoning, as one would expect, but the friar himself contradicts it in his subsequent argument that Juliet’s death is a crushing punishment for “crossing [the] high will” of heaven (4.5.84-90). This contradiction indicates that the altruism which the friar initially advocates is beyond the scope of human nature, for the apparently purely self-denying care of lovers and parents is, as we shall see, not an end in itself, but ultimately a means of securing the satisfactions of an intimate attachment. Even the friar’s own relative serenity is derived from eros rather than agape: he himself has responded to Juliet’s plight with passionate sympathy and worked hard to safeguard her life, rather than charitably consigning her to heaven as he advises her family to do.

The friar’s scholastic amalgam of philosophy and Christianity– “fond nature bids us all lament, yet nature’s tears are reason’s merriment”–is implicitly contrasted with the consolations of art, as represented by the musicians who were to play at Juliet’s wedding, who are about to depart after hearing of her apparent death, but are eventually persuaded to use their “silver sound” to ease “griping griefs” (4.5.82-83, 4.5.96-146). The implication seems to be that intense grief can be more effectively moderated through cathartic imitation than rational, or pseudo-rational argument, just as Romeo is revived by Juliet’s ring rather than the friar’s words. This point is illustrated by the tragic ending of the play itself, which treats bereavement neither as a punishment nor a blessing, but fully acknowledges its sadness, while at the same time reminding us, as we shall see, that there is a sense in which true love can defy death.[[2]](#endnote-14)

In contrast with the stalwart Juliet, who commits suicide in order to stay with Romeo, the friar protects himself at the end of the play: after offering to place her in a nunnery he attempts to escape from the watch– “I dare no longer stay”–but is discovered, “trembl[ing], sigh[ing], and weep[ing]” (5.3.151-87).[[3]](#endnote-15) Although he may be feeling guilt and pity at this moment–no doubt inspired partly by his awareness that he has failed to live up to his Christian principles–as well as fear for his own life, his desertion of Juliet nevertheless places him firmly in the lower tier of Queen Mab’s hierarchy, albeit above more consistently stolid characters like Benvolio and Lady Capulet, since it confirms that his ultimate priority is prudent self-love. Just as suffering drives lovers to progress up the hierarchy, it also exposes the limitations of the less erotic characters, whose pangs of sympathy may not be sufficiently intense to override the pain of the sacrifices which would be required to alleviate them.

Friar Lawrence gives Escalus a full summary of the events of the play in a manner that immediately proves to be expedient, since his account is confirmed by Romeo’s letter to his father (5.3.229-90). His decision to reveal that the nurse was also “privy” to the clandestine marriage seems likely to prove as shrewd as Benvolio’s earlier excision of Mercutio’s role from his parallel account of the duel: the friar understands that, although the prince “know[s] [him] for a holy man,” he is looking for someone to punish for having “lost a brace of kinsmen” (5.3.265-66, 3.1.152-75, 5.3.269, 5.3.219-22, 5.3.308, 5.3.295). This heartless action, which he must know might well destroy the nurse, suggests that neither Christian charity nor classical philosophy can override self-love in the way that they claim.

As we have seen, Tybalt and the servants embody the mixture of honourable pride and tribal camaraderie that typically characterises the second tier in Queen Mab’s scale. Mercutio essentially belongs to this intermediate group, as the parallels between his duel with Tybalt and the brawl in act 1 scene 1 suggest: like Sampson and Gregory, he initially limits himself to a purely verbal provocation, but then suddenly abandons this restraint when his friend appears; like the Montague servants, he fights for a friend who has explicitly requested him to refrain from doing so, but who, as a result of his actions, is in the end drawn into the fray (compare 1.1.1-72 and 3.1.35-89). In each case the confrontation is originally sparked by a proud sense of honour, but it is the characters’ attachments which ultimately drive them to issue an illegal challenge: “Here’s much to do with hate, but more with love” (1.1.175).

There is no doubt, however, that Mercutio is the most erotic of this spirited group of characters; he could be said indeed to live only at one remove from serious passion, as is perhaps implied by the fact that his brother is called Valentine (1.2.67-68). Like the eponymous lovers he makes a free erotic choice, rather than being guided by domestic allegiances: although he “consort[s]” with Romeo so regularly that he could almost be styled an honorary Montague, he is actually of course a relative of the prince (3.1.45). He is always searching for his friend, and the sheer relief which he shows at the apparent resumption of their intimacy is one of several indications that his attachment to Romeo runs far deeper than he admits: “Now art thou Romeo; now art thou what thou art” (2.1.6-41, 2.4.1-5, 2.4.89-90). His intense enjoyment of the moment when he is outdone by his friend’s wordplay and his “wits faints” shows that he is capable of valuing their bantering camaraderie even over his habitual assertiveness (2.4.45-93). Since it is likely that he emphasises the pain and humiliation which passion inevitably inflicts purely in order to discourage Romeo from his romantic affairs and thus clear the way for a resumption of their camaraderie, the very vehemence of his tirade against Queen Mab is, ironically, a sign that he himself is one of her victims (1.4.66, 1.4.75, 1.4.82, 1.4.93).[[4]](#endnote-16) From one point of view of course he shows the bold courage of a true lover in challenging Tybalt, a notoriously skilful fencer, to a duel purely on his friend’s behalf (2.4.19-26).

It is important to note, however, that Mercutio fights Tybalt to protect his friend’s honour rather than his well-being: “O calm, dishonorable, vile submission” (3.1.73). Pride is indeed always his overriding consideration, although there is no doubt that his attachment exerts a powerful gravitational pull on his gentlemanly sense of honour, as is underlined by Tybalt’s puzzled response to his intervention on Romeo’s behalf (3.1.56, 3.1.76). It is his pride which drives him to disguise the intense need for Romeo which motivates the Queen Mab speech as a bantering repudiation of all passion. Throughout the play his scornful mockery allows him to vent his frustration in a similarly flippant manner, without explicitly, or even perhaps consciously, acknowledging his own humiliating neediness. In a play where, as we shall see, deep feeling tends to be wordless, Mercutio’s notorious prolixity is itself a sign of his determination to repress such feeling (2.4.147-49). Whereas Romeo has been “stabb’d with a white wench’s black eye” and is “up to the ears” in the “mire” of love, Mercutio implicitly claims to have preserved his own dignity and autonomy by treating passion as a purely physical urge to “run lolling up and down to hide [one’s] bauble in a hole,” which can easily be sated, presumably either with the help of the prostitutes to whom he so frequently alludes, or simply through masturbation: “be rough with love; prick love for pricking, and you beat love down” (2.4.13-17, 1.4.41-43, 2.4.91-93, 2.4.112-39, 2.4.74-87, 1.4.27-28).

Mercutio vents his neediness and jealousy indirectly, through spirited aggression, since this is the only response which is compatible with his pride. His sudden discovery that Romeo’s renewed good humour does not in fact herald the resumption of their old friendship, but simply indicates that he has found another mistress, seems to precipitate both his aggressive mockery of the nurse and his subsequent refusal to “retire” from a place where they shall not “’scape a brawl” if the Capulets appear (2.4.110-139, 3.1.1-55). Mercutio’s ongoing sense of desolation is brought to a head by his friend’s “calm, dishonorable, vile submission” to Tybalt, which must seem to him to encapsulate the transformation that has destroyed their friendship (3.1.73). His duel with Tybalt is a substitute for the fight with Romeo which he has been attempting, and failing, to provoke for some time -as Benvolio anxiously observes, the obscene jokes which he makes about Rosaline are clearly designed to “anger” his friend (2.1.17-38). Although the duel enables him both to vent his frustration and prove his loyalty, no doubt partly with the hope of inspiring his friend’s gratitude and guilt, it simultaneously allows him to disguise these passionate feelings–even, presumably, from himself–beneath his official motives, which are to defend Romeo’s honour, while simultaneously displaying his own superior courage. If Mercutio’s reckless provocation of Tybalt is an act of self-destruction, it is contrasted with the lovers’ suicides, which simply affirm their constancy, since it seems to reflect a desperate awareness that he can neither completely suppress his deep attachment, nor pursue it openly and freely.[[5]](#endnote-17)

Mercutio’s repression of his own desires is necessarily matched by a brusque lack of concern for his friend’s feelings: “He jests at scars that never felt a wound” (2.2.1). He is no more concerned to understand Romeo’s refusal to fight than he was sympathetic with his reluctance to attend the masque. It is his amour propre which prevents him from showing the self-denying care, which is, as we shall see, the means by which truly passionate lovers create the sympathetic rapport that they crave. As he is dying, Mercutio reveals his priorities by making his friend suffer in order to relieve his wounded pride, blaming Romeo for the fact that “a braggart” has beaten him without being wounded in return: “I was hurt under your arm” (3.1.102-03). Pointedly ignoring Romeo’s horrified excuses, he turns instead to Benvolio to “help [him] to some house” -thus betraying his true indifference to the “houses” which, in the same breath, he blames so emphatically for his approaching death, presumably in an effort to distract attention from its real cause (3.1.104-08).

Thus, unlike the lovers, who, as we shall see, endure their deaths calmly, with a courage sustained by their loyal intimacy, Mercutio’s pride divides him from his friend and from his own yearning for such an intimacy. If his bold intervention is designed to secure his friend’s loyal gratitude, or at least in the end to make him feel sufficiently guilty never to forget him, then this effort proves futile, for Romeo is distracted from Juliet only for as long as it takes to wreak his revenge, after which he never mentions Mercutio again, but focuses instead on a relationship which can provide “grace for grace and love for love” (2.3.86). By contrast, Romeo’s humble attempt to endure Tybalt’s insults without retaliating would have helped to cement his union with Juliet had he been able to maintain this effort to control his spirited anger. In the end Shakespeare shows that the lovers’ stalwart determination to restrain any potentially divisive manifestation of self-love is a far more valuable type of courage than noble displays of boldness, since it can help them to earn the truly substantial reward of a loyal intimacy.

Generalising from the example of Mercutio, one can infer that friendship is a less effective catalyst of deep, lasting attachment than romantic relationships–where, as we shall see, sexual desire naturally facilitates an unaffected intimacy–since it is generally quite compatible with a degree of proud reserve. In contrast with Romeo, who exposes himself to an intense, but productive suffering, the swaggering, yet ultimately cautious Mercutio has not been prepared to acknowledge his need for intimacy, or to work hard to fulfil this need through the “calm, dishonourable…submission” of a self-denying, constant, sympathetic devotion, which would have involved showing a deeper form of fortitude than the bold machismo which he champions and models.[[6]](#endnote-18) Nevertheless, one only has to consider the examples of Horatio and Celia and Rosalind, not to mention that of Enobarbus, to realise that Shakespeare considers it to be entirely possible at times for intimate friends to show precisely such a devotion.

Capulet and the nurse can be classed among the more passionate characters in the third, or highest tier of the erotic hierarchy, albeit at a level below that of the eponymous lovers. There is no doubt that Capulet’s ruling passion is his devotion to his only remaining child; “the hopeful lady of my earth”: at one point he implies that he would normally just retire to bed after realising that Juliet will “not come down tonight” (1.2.14-15, 3.4.5-7). He has apparently been resisting Paris’s requests for permission to court his daughter for some time, but has reluctantly realised that he cannot allow his own passionate possessiveness to obstruct a match with a man who is handsome, wealthy and of noble birth (1.2.6-19, 3.5.179-82). However, although he decides to hold a party in order to give Paris an opportunity to press his suit, and even instructs his wife to prepare Juliet to receive an offer of marriage, he still clings to the fanciful hope that he can distract him by inviting numerous other “beauteous…lovely…fair…lively” women to the masque (1.3.63-104, 1.2.24-33, 1.2.64-71). He limits himself to this ineffectual attempt to subvert his own plans, and to objections which are apparently rooted purely in worries about Juliet’s own health–young mothers are “too soon marr’d” (1.2.12-13)–because he cares too much about his daughter’s happiness to allow himself to assert his own need for her in a more direct or insistent manner. His care for her is evident in the way in which he instructs Paris to “woo her [and] get her heart,” declaring–ironically of course, in the light of later events–that his own “will to her consent is but a part,” but we can see already that his brave efforts to devote himself to his Juliet’s interests are in danger of being undermined by his own neediness (1.2.16-19).

Capulet does indeed make a half-hearted gesture at the masque towards putting into practise his scheme to divert Paris’s attention from Juliet, as he urges the “ladies” to display their charms on the dance floor, but unlike Mercutio, whose jealous possessiveness leads him actually to carry through a similar plan to extract Romeo from the “mire” of love, he manages to prioritise his daughter’s interests over his own needs, at least at this point in the play (1.5.16-20, 1.4.13-43). The extent of his affectionate concern for Juliet is illustrated by his determined refusal to use Tybalt’s wish to punish Romeo for his apparent “scorn at our solemnity” as an excuse to disrupt her introduction to Paris (1.5.54-88). Although Capulet’s incisive quelling of Tybalt indicates that passionate characters can defend their commitment to their beloveds forcefully in the face of external threats, he is typical of such characters in that his courage more naturally takes the form of a humble, stoical determination to devote himself to his love, as he applies himself patiently to facilitating Juliet’s happiness and his own impending loss. This devotion easily overrides his customary, fierce hostility towards the Montagues, whereas Tybalt is able to give free rein to his spirited aggression because he is ruled entirely by his allegiance to his tribe (1.1.75-78).

The nurse suffers for the same reasons as Capulet, since she too is passionately devoted to Juliet. She remembers Juliet’s age, not only because of the earthquake which took place eleven years previously, but because the tremor coincided with, and indeed was overshadowed by, the child’s angry response to her weaning– “pretty fool, to see it teachy and fall out wi’ th’ dug”–which the nurse herself clearly found deeply unpleasant, no doubt because it disrupted a delightful harmony of childish dependency and motherly care (1.3.26-34).[[7]](#endnote-19) Her eagerness to “trudge” away when the earthquake distracts them both for a moment from this unaccustomed conflict reflects the pain which she is feeling as her care for Juliet impels her to trigger what is in effect the first phase of a gradual separation. Like Capulet, the nurse, who has also lost a child–not to mention a husband–has clearly invested all her motherly affection in Juliet, but must now accept that her charge is no longer dependent on her protection (1.3.18-20, 1.3.39-40).

The nurse’s role has been to shepherd Juliet through the painful transition from the comfortable security of childhood to a fully passionate adulthood–as Shakespeare implies by naming her after a herb, Angelica, which was often used to mitigate menstrual cramps (4.4.5)–but nothing can alleviate the pain of her own impending loss, even though she undoubtedly takes some vicarious pleasure in the prospect of Juliet being happily married (1.3.61-105). Like Capulet, the nurse ignores the family feud in a courageous attempt to promote the match that she hopes will bring her beloved fulfilment. However, despite her effort to serve Juliet in an entirely self-effacing manner, she betrays in a variety of unobtrusive ways her underlying reluctance to trigger the process which will eventually lead to the loss of her charge: her demeanour is unexpectedly sad when she returns from her interview with Romeo, and she keeps her beloved waiting in agonising suspense before divulging his plans for a secret marriage, while at the same time seeking to satisfy her own frustrated needs indirectly, through an insistent demand for physical care (2.5.21-63). She even allows herself to express the resentment which she feels at the necessity to engineer her own loss– “I am the drudge, and toil in your delight”–as well as a degree of bitter relish at the prospect of her beloved “bear[ing] the burthen soon at night,” as it finally becomes Juliet’s turn to experience the pain of motherhood, but takes care to do so in a misleadingly flippant way (2.5.75-76).

Ironically, it is precisely the nurse’s concern to subordinate her own needs entirely to those of her beloved which creates this unacknowledged disharmony: not only must she lose Juliet, and indeed exert herself to facilitate this loss, but, because the austere imperatives of her parental role prevent her from expressing her grief directly or openly demanding any compensatory care, her needs are bound to remain unfulfilled, and indeed not even noticed by Juliet, but can only spill over occasionally in these unobtrusively divisive ways. As we shall see, this unbalanced relationship is contrasted with the reciprocal “grace for grace and love for love” which the lovers exchange, which allows them sustain an absolutely staunch devotion (2.3.86). Thus, although the nurse’s repression is different from Mercutio’s in that it springs from a humble, protective affection for her beloved, its consequence is not entirely dissimilar–as is implied by the way in which she echoes his bitter reflections on the maids who are taught “to bear”–since both are too distracted by their own frustrated needs to be able to offer their beloved a fully sympathetic care (1.4.92-94).

Similarly, at the very moment when Capulet is bracing himself to lose his daughter even earlier than he originally intended, Juliet’s refusal to marry Paris exposes his deep uncertainty as to whether his care is returned, causing his simmering resentment at this inevitable imbalance to boil over into a towering rage: “Doth she not give us thanks?” he demands, since, “Day, night, work, play…still my care hath been to have her match’d” (4.1.11, 3.5.142, 3.4.176-78). Thus, although he clearly vents his feelings much more aggressively, Capulet’s pain springs from the same source as that of the nurse, since both resent the fact that they are obliged to engineer their own loss without any compensation for their care. Even in his rage it is noticeable that Capulet’s parental role leads him to foreground his protective concern for Juliet and conceal the neediness which is the underlying cause of his anger, although, as befits his more passionate nature, he is slightly more direct than either the nurse or Mercutio in demanding at least some degree of gratitude as recompense. The parallels that emerge between the nurse and Capulet, as they both strive with only partial success to repress their own needs and resign themselves to their forthcoming loss, seem designed to suggest that it is the parental role itself which restricts their capacity for sympathetic care.

Ironically, it is precisely because of the fundamental imbalance created by the necessity for parents to play a largely protective role that Capulet and the nurse are unable to meet Juliet’s demand for a “pity…that sees into the bottom of my grief” (3.5.196-97). This is not of course to question the sincerity of the nurse’s compassion for her charge: she tearfully exclaims, “God in heaven bless her!” as Capulet rages at her, and, after attempting bravely but unavailingly to intercede on her behalf, exerts herself to repair the situation by a desperate proposal that Juliet commit bigamy (3.5.168-73, 3.5.212-28). The way in which she pauses before she unfolds this plan, the breezy manner which she adopts thereafter, and the particular oath which she chooses to underline her sincerity, “Beshrew my very heart”– which she then repeats and extends, declaring that she is speaking from her heart and her “soul too, else beshrew them both”–all provide strong hints that she is having to crush her own passionate instincts in order to protect her beloved (3.5.221, 3.5.227). The sardonic “amen” with which Juliet responds before consigning her to “damnation” perhaps provides a hint that the self-recrimination unconsciously contained in these apparently purely conventional oaths could be taken absolutely seriously (3.5.228-35). Ironically, the gulf between the two opens up precisely because both assume, quite naturally, that the nurse’s role is primarily protective: the nurse distorts her own deepest feelings in an effort to offer Juliet the “comfort” she has requested, rather than simply standing by her in sympathetic alignment, come what may, as Romeo does earlier in the same scene when he declares a simple willingness to “stay and die” for his beloved (3.5.228-35, 3.5.11-25).

Naturally, the protective instincts of Juliet’s two main carers impel them to focus primarily on preserving her life and well-being when they see her in distress. In what is, ironically, an act of great self-denial Capulet brings Juliet’s wedding forward, abandoning his earlier insistence that Paris should laboriously win her affection, because he “counts it dangerous” that she should give her grief (for Tybalt, as he assumes) “so much sway…by herself alone,” and hopes that her “tears” may be “put from her” by “society” and the excitement of the nuptial arrangements (1.2.16-19, 4.1.9-15; see also 3.4.1-7). Similarly, the nurse probably feels forced to support a bigamous marriage to Paris by her concern for Juliet’s welfare after Capulet’s threat to let her beloved “beg, starve, die in the streets” has driven her to talk of suicide (3.5.188-201). Thus, both parental figures bravely overcome their initial reluctance to promote the match with Paris in order to safeguard their beloved’s life and health, but, ironically, in doing so still fall well short of a fully sympathetic care, since Juliet herself is so far from prioritising her own physical well-being at this point in the play that she declares that she would rather die than submit to this marriage. Inevitably perhaps, given that they lack a deep sense of unity with their beloved, the ultimate purpose of their sacrifices is in fact not to serve Juliet, as they certainly imagine, but to protect themselves from bereavement.

Like Romeo as he commits suicide (see below), the nurse and Capulet are therefore simply attempting to preserve their deepest attachment, and, as we have seen, are prepared to make great sacrifices in order to do so, but, ironically, through their desperate efforts to avoid bereavement they actually forfeit the trusting relationship which they have taken such pains to develop: Juliet keeps to her word when she vows that the nurse and her “bosom henceforth shall be twain” and, in contrast with Romeo, who writes a letter to old Montague explaining his death, makes no further effort to contact her father (5.3.102-08, 3.5.240, 4.3.1-18, 5.3.275). The stalwart unity with Juliet which Romeo shows in the same scene is directly contrasted to the stunted and ambivalent care offered by Capulet and the nurse: he has “more care to stay than will to go,” and is prepared to forfeit his own life in order to align himself precisely with what “Juliet wills” (3.5.17-25). As we shall see, only Romeo shows an absolutely steadfast determination to suffer alongside Juliet even later in the play, when he has no hope of being sustained by her physical presence ever again, because only he experiences the delightful sense of trusting, loyal intimacy, borne of an equal exchange of “grace for grace and love for love” which is the only adequate reward for this degree of obdurate courage. By contrast, Capulet and the nurse are too needy to be capable of emulating such a radical, self-denial, since they know that their care can never be fully reciprocated, and so concentrate officiously on safeguarding Juliet’s life, no doubt with the thought that they will still be able to satisfy their need to see her occasionally, even after her marriage to Paris (2.3.86). Thus, the failings of the two parental figures, which are from one point of view monstrous, since they could easily have impelled Juliet into a bigamous marriage, suggest that a truly stalwart courage can only be generated by the erotic fulfilment which is derived from a deep intimacy.

The pressure of the play’s tragic events is calculated to expose the characters’ deepest priorities and therefore their precise position in the erotic hierarchy. The various reactions to Juliet’s apparent death can be ranked according to the depth of the mourner’s suffering: Lady Capulet’s self-pity and Paris’s exasperation correspond respectively to the first two levels of Mab’s hierarchy, whereas the nurse occupies an intermediate position, since her incoherent exclamations seem to mingle self-pity and sadness on Juliet’s behalf in equal measure: “O woeful, woeful, woeful day” (4.5.41-58). In contrast, Capulet is for a moment struck completely dumb, just as the lovers felt too overwhelmed to speak before their marriage (4.5.32). After recovering his voice, he starts his most heartfelt speech with a list of adjectives, as do the other mourners, but, uniquely, applies them all to Juliet’s distress rather than his own: “Despis’d, distressed, hated, martyr’d, kill’d!” (Compare 4.5.59 with 4.5.43, 4.5.49, 4.5.55). Although he shows some self-pity elsewhere in his response, he is fundamentally too attuned to Juliet’s needs to be able to deny that it was his own failure of sympathetic understanding which drove her to her supposed suicide (4.5.38-40, 4.5.64).

From now on Capulet’s guilt will doubtless prove to be a constant burden, since it essentially represents an instinctive acknowledgement that he has failed to live up to the standards which love itself ultimately demands. However, as is typical of the play as a whole, this intense pain also enables him to progress up the erotic scale: his determination to erect a statue in commemoration of his daughter’s secret beloved seems to spring from a need to earn forgiveness, albeit posthumously, through a fully sympathetic devotion (5.3.303-04). This implies that parental affection may in many cases eventually be reformulated in a way that allows for a truly equitable exchange of need and care.

By contrast, Romeo and Juliet’s love almost immediately impels them to practise such an exchange. As well as being “alike bewitched by the charm of looks,” Romeo is now, crucially, “belov’d and loves again,” as the chorus puts it: he tells the friar simply that Juliet “doth…love for love allow; the other did not so” (see prologue to act 2, 2.3.85-87). Whereas Romeo’s desire for Rosaline was an inchoate mixture of sexual attraction and nascent attachment, Juliet’s responsiveness encourages him to prioritise his yearning for a lasting intimacy over his immediate physical passion. The fact that, even before he talks to Juliet, Romeo’s physical attraction to this “snowy dove trooping with crows” is immediately sublimated into an admiration for an ethereal “beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear,” which has the capacity to “make blessed [his] rude hand,” serves to demonstrate that his concern in their first meeting to atone for his “rough touch” and “trespass” with kisses is more than a way of disguising his intense sexual desire -although this is certainly one of his motives (1.5.44-53, 1.5.93-110). The lovers implicitly use the pilgrim’s desire to transcend his fallen nature and dedicate his life to God as an analogy for their own instinctive urge to subordinate physical passion, and indeed all other desires and fears, to their yearning for an enduring intimacy. [[8]](#endnote-20) The promise of this intimacy ultimately drives them to practise a far more courageous self-denial than Capulet or the nurse could ever manage to do.

Sexual desire undoubtedly has an unrivalled power to create an immediate sense of intimacy, as can be seen from the contrast between the lovers’ relatively open expression of their desires, which famously leads them to kiss twice even in their first encounter, and the reserve which Mercutio, Capulet and the nurse all feel compelled to exercise. Ironically, however, physical passion often helps to trigger a desire to secure a lasting attachment, which in turn tends to to generate a degree of continence: thus Juliet partially conceals her own feelings during the lovers’ first encounter, while requesting that Romeo show “mannerly devotion,” and is later anxious to deny him any further physical “satisfaction,” because she understands that in itself sexual passion resembles “the lightning, which doth cease to be, ere one can say it lightens” (1.5.97-100, 2.2.119-26). Her rueful admission that she would have been “more strange” if Romeo had not already overheard her expressing her real feelings is not merely conventionally coy, but reflects a natural concern that he might think her “too quickly won” and therefore less likely to be “true,” and perhaps also a worry–tactfully veiled of course– that she has lost the chance of judging whether his own “bent of love be honorable” which a period of decorous reserve might have provided (2.2.95-106, 2.2.143). Juliet’s reserve is of course a temporary measure, unlike that exercised by Capulet, the nurse and Mercutio, since it is purely designed to clear the way for a trusting intimacy.

However, sexual continence is only one aspect of the determined restraint which the lovers exercise in order to establish and maintain the relationship: it is significant that, even in the wake of their initial, earth-shaking encounter, Juliet has the presence of mind to disguise her intense desire to discover her beloved’s name (1.5.128-43).[[9]](#endnote-21) As with Capulet, Juliet’s desire to possess her beloved is moderated by the intense concern for his welfare which it immediately creates: she is torn between a desire to tie Romeo to her hand forever like a tame bird and the knowledge that he is in too much danger to stay any longer (2.2.176-85). Thus, like pilgrims, the lovers begin to demonstrate an unobtrusive, patient fortitude, as their deep needs teach them to restrain any potentially divisive desires, and to protect the beloved upon whom they depend for their fulfilment.

Romeo’s passion moderates his spirited assertiveness as well as his physical desire: his grief over Rosaline leads him to hold himself aloof from the brawls between the two families, in which his mother implies he would normally have participated, and, as we have seen, to hesitate before going to the Capulets’ masque, while his desire for Juliet easily overrides any anger that he might feel in response to Mercutio’s provocative insults (1.1.117, 2.1.1). Mindful of his agonising rejection by Rosaline, he is above all concerned to avoid the “peril” of Juliet’s disapproval, and so breaks off from two solemn oaths of loyalty at a word from his beloved (2.2.107-15). He also easily accommodates himself to Juliet’s plea for continence, for the “satisfaction” of her “faithful vow” now means much more to him than the kisses which he demanded on their first encounter, as is shown by the fact that he does not even attempt to climb up to her balcony (2.2.125-27). By the end of the scene Juliet can compare him first to a caged bird and then to a trained falcon, since he forfeits both his pride and his desire for an immediate physical consummation willingly–in precisely the way that Mercutio would find shamefully humiliating–lured on to endear himself to his beloved in every possible way by his own desire to deepen and prolong the attachment (2.2.158-83).[[10]](#endnote-22)

The lovers are more steadfastly determined to restrain their own divisive needs and foreground their sympathetic care than Capulet, the nurse or Mercutio, because they have much more to lose: as soon as Juliet’s worries have been allayed by her beloved’s demand that they “exchange…faithful vow[s],” she admits that her love is “as boundless as the sea” (2.2.127-33). From this moment onwards they are sustained in their obdurate fidelity by the knowledge that their love is returned, “grace for grace” (2.3.86).[[11]](#endnote-23) Unlike sexual desire, the pleasures of a fully trusting and constant intimacy are inexhaustible, and in fact constitute an unlimited ultimate good: “the more I give to you, the more I have” (2.2.134-35). It is significant that on the eve of their marriage neither lover can comment on anything but their inability to “sum up” their joy: this joy is a *summum bonum* to which we are drawn only by noetic intuitions; itself immeasurable even as it provides the ultimate standard by which all other passions can be measured (2.6.24-34). The corollary of this point is that the loss of this ultimate good creates a grief which is “discreet” and “chok[ing],” precisely because it is beyond rational control or analysis (1.1.193-94). Whereas Romeo can express his more superficial grief over Rosaline to Benvolio–albeit even at this point reluctantly, as we have seen–he says nothing about his pain when he hears of Juliet’s supposed death, although his “looks are pale and wild” (5.1.24-30).

The lovers’ self-restraint is, however, matched by the spirited boldness which leads them to defy external obstacles to their love. The story which the nurse tells about the infant Juliet hints at this boldness: in reply to the nurse’s husband’s bawdy question, the toddler, who has just fallen over, solemnly agrees that she will indeed “fall backward” when she is older (1.3.35-57). Juliet has prepared the way for resisting an arranged marriage even before she meets Romeo, since she does not in fact promise to accept Paris, as she allows her mother to assume, but only–ironically–that she will restrain herself from desiring anyone of whom her parents disapprove (1.3.97-99). Of course, her intense attraction and attachment to Romeo soon lead her not only to break even this qualified commitment, but, in contrast with the more prudent Rosaline, to defy the artificial constraints imposed by the family feud– “What’s Montague?” she famously asks, reflecting that it is “nor arm nor face, nor any other part belonging to a man” (2.2.38-49). Her prudence is not self-protective, but reflects her intense desire to safeguard the relationship: when Romeo appears so unexpectedly under her balcony, she is too worried that he will be “murther[ed]” by her kinsmen to be frightened on her own account (2.2.49-74).

By implication, Juliet’s passion also overrides conventional piety: she can conceive of no higher power by which Romeo could swear than his “gracious self, which is the god of [her] idolatry” (2.2.112-15). She values the sacrament of marriage and her maidenly modesty–which, as we have seen, she regrets having accidentally forfeited–purely because they might help her to fulfil her natural longing for a lasting intimacy, but defies the constraints conventionally imposed both by her gender and her tribal allegiance, as she takes it upon herself to plan her marriage to the son of her father’s greatest enemy (2.2.142-48).[[12]](#endnote-24)

Romeo himself is also bold for the same reason as he is restrained, since the “peril” of experiencing Juliet’s disapproval overshadows all other passions. He too is ready to renounce his family and to defy the constraints created by the family feud in order to pursue his passion: at the risk of being “murther[ed]” by the Capulets he “leap[s] [the] orchard wall” that divides him from his beloved, which is “high and hard to climb,” after deciding that death can “do what he dare, it is enough I may but call her mine” (2.1.5, 2.2.63-73, 2.6.7-8). The chorus’s comment, that passion “lends…power…, temp’ring extremities with extreme sweet,” attributes the lovers’ bravery to the fact that their prospective pleasures are so delightful that they outweigh any suffering which might be incurred in the process of securing them (prologue to act 2, 13-14). The contrast between their boldness in confronting external obstacles and the restraint which they exercise within their relationship is obliquely alluded to through the nurse’s confusion as to whether the first part of Romeo’s name sounds more like rosemary, as Juliet playfully assumes, since the herb traditionally represents fidelity, or a dog’s growl: Romeo himself could in fact be seen as resembling both at once, for the loyalty of dogs impels them to be assertive with their enemies and docile with their friends (2.4.206-12). This combination of moderation and boldness reflects the power of a deep attachment to override the self-love which commonly regulates both the desires and the fears of non-lovers.

Like Capulet at the masque, Romeo is at first too concerned for Juliet’s feelings to fight a duel with her cousin:

Tybalt, the reason that I have to love thee

Doth much excuse the appertaining rage

To such a greeting.

(3.1.62-64; see also 3.1.68-72)

Since even this initial response to Tybalt’s rudeness implies that he does not entirely “excuse” the latter’s behaviour, it is evident that Romeo’s spirited pride has not yet been entirely moderated by his passion, despite his efforts to serve Juliet with an intransigent loyalty. His efforts at humble restraint are quickly abandoned after Mercutio’s death, which triggers as noble an indignation as his friend might have wished (3.1.113-31). The uncharacteristically grandiose and clichéd language which Romeo uses before fighting Tybalt–he vows in what one critic calls a “base rant” to prioritise “valor’s steel” over “effeminate” moderation confirms that his revenge is motivated primarily by honourable pride.[[13]](#endnote-25) This is not to deny that he also shows an ardent constancy peculiarly his own, which may indeed be what lends him the extra strength to defeat a superior swordsman (2.4.13-26): he declares that “Mercutio’s soul is but a little way above our heads” and seems for a moment willing to “keep him company,” even if he cannot kill his foe.

It is significant that this lapse causes Romeo’s exile, for, as Mercutio’s own case illustrates, amour propre is intrinsically divisive, being absolutely antithetical to the humble self-denial which deep attachments demand. However, as is typical of the play as a whole, Romeo’s suffering is ultimately productive, for it is precisely the pain of having apparently forfeited his beloved’s affection–which even seems to outweigh that of his apparent bereavement at the end of the play–which finally impels him to abandon his pride completely: at Friar Lawrence’s cell he surrenders to an undignified despair, disregarding the nurse’s adjuration to “be a man,” and rising from his abject position only when she reminds him that he must “stand up…for Juliet’s sake” (3.3.83-91). Henceforth, Romeo eschews all pretensions to nobility: thus, he commits suicide in the least dramatic and most efficient manner possible, after haggling with a disreputable chemist in order to acquire the poison he needs (5.1.78-86, 5.1.119-20). When forced to fight Paris outside Juliet’s tomb, he approaches the duel simply as another of the chores required by his devotion to his beloved (5.3.58-70). Indeed, this second duel again seems designed to underline the incompatibility between love and pride: while Romeo is pursuing his plan to die alongside Juliet with humble, obdurate determination, Paris (whose noble indignation is typical of the spirited group of characters) is easily distracted from strewing flowers on her tomb by an honourable concern lest the intruder might do the bodies “some villainous shame” (5.3.12-17, 5.3.49-53).

In venting his grief to Friar Lawrence Romeo initially dwells at length on the fact that he will no longer be able to touch or see Juliet, but after being revived by the nurse in the manner described above, his desperate need for his beloved is immediately sublimated into a sympathetic concern, since he knows that the rapport which he fears he has forfeited is founded on mutual care: “How is it with her…how doth she?” (3.3.12-59, 3.3.88-98). Just as he only despairs fully when the nurse inadvertently implies that he has alienated Juliet by killing Tybalt, his “comfort is reviv’d” when she gives his beloved’s ring (3.3.99-108, 3.3.163-65). Indeed, his calmness at the end of this scene seems to be derived more from this simple demonstration of Juliet’s continuing loyalty than the knowledge that he will spend the night with her, or even the hope that they will soon be reunited, although these undoubtedly play their part in his recovery (3.3.146-65). This shows that not only sexual desire, but even physical propinquity itself matters less to the lovers than their underlying sense of sympathetic alignment. Because he is now completely sure that Juliet still loves him, Romeo is able to resign himself more courageously to a far more radical separation from his beloved than the removal which Capulet and the nurse are contemplating with such consternation.

The nurse treats the friar’s attempt to moderate Romeo’s grief purely as a formal exercise– “O, what learning is!”–thus implicitly agreeing with the latter that it is pointless to “speak” of what one cannot “feel” (3.3.159-60, 3.3.64). As we have seen, the corollary of the lovers’ inability to find words to convey their joy before their marriage is that the pain of losing an unlimited good is a “choking gall” which is beyond any rational control (1.1.194). The nurse seems to understand that only passion itself can moderate such a grief: “for Juliet’s sake…rise and stand” (3.3.89). She is, however, confident that it will do so in the end: after forestalling Romeo’s desperate urge to commit suicide, she simply says that she will “tell my lady you will come,” whereas the friar allows the crucial point that his suicide would “slay thy lady that in thy life lives” to be obscured by a series of arguments which mainly appeal–irrelevantly, as far as his protégée is concerned–to his pride and instinct for survival (3.3.161, 3.3.109-29, 3.3.24-51).

The “modesty” which Juliet shows as she waits for Romeo to come to her bed is not conventionally coy, but springs from an inchoate recognition that, compared to the satisfactions of a constant attachment, her sensual excitement is as fleeting as Phoebus’s “fiery-footed steeds,” galloping towards night, or a child’s impatience to don a new set of party clothes (3.2.1-4, 3.2.26-31). Echoing the falconry imagery in the balcony scene, with its associations of persistent, disciplined care, she asks “civil night” to “hood [her] unmann’d blood, bating in [her] cheeks” and allow her to “think true love acted simple modesty,” thus sublimating her transient pleasure by reminding herself that it is only the first of many expressions of constant devotion (2.2.158-67, 3.2.14-16). Even at this dizzyingly exciting moment her sexual desire is almost overshadowed by the steadfast, self-denying care which is the natural consequence of her deeper longing for a lasting intimacy: she longs to possess her beloved, body and soul– “Give me my Romeo”–but she also relishes the idea of him living on in the night sky, etched in stars, even after her own death (3.2.20-25).

Throughout the play Shakespeare inverts the traditionally negative connotations of night and darkness in order to suggest that restrained endurance is the mark of a truly passionate attachment. In the morning before her marriage to Romeo Juliet can only burn with sensual anticipation, which for lovers “ten times faster glides than the sun’s beams, driving back shadows,” but after the ceremony, when the “fiery-footed,” but “garish” sun begins to descend to “Phoebus’ lodging,” she is much more solemn, as she contemplates a lasting devotion, symbolised by the serene, unchanging beauty of the night sky (2.5.1-17, 3.2.1-25). It is “in the night” that Queen Mab “presses” the maids and forces them to “learn…to bear” with “good carriage” (1.4.92-94). Juliet “bear[s] the burthen…at night,” just as the nurse predicted: it is at night that her care for Romeo teaches her to postpone her pleasure, both in the balcony scene and after she loses the argument about birdsong; and it is at night when she first takes the potion and then, two evenings later, stabs herself (2.5.76, 4.1.105-06).[[14]](#endnote-26)

Similarly, Romeo’s education begins with his struggles to contain his grief after his rejection by Rosaline, during which he “locks fair daylight out, and makes himself an artificial night” -an image which perhaps indicates that he retains more control over his feelings than he realises at this early point in the play, having not yet been fully exposed to the pain of love (1.1.118-40). His portrayal of Juliet as “full of light” in the darkness of the vault is the last of a series of similar contrasts, all of which suggest that the constancy of lovers is developed through adversity, just as the unchanging brightness of the stars is only revealed by night (5.3.86). At the masque he conveys his awed reverence for his mistress’s beauty by comparing her to a bright jewel, “hanging on the cheek of night,” while in the balcony scene it is significant that he shifts his image for Juliet from the sun to the stars just at the moment when he decides to restrain his sudden impulse to speak (1.5.44-46, 2.2.2-22).[[15]](#endnote-27)

Whereas Romeo turns day into night as he strives to control his desperate grief, and Capulet stays up all night in his eagerness to give Juliet the perfect wedding, the impatient Mercutio jokes that the friends “burn daylight” as they argue about their plan to attend the masque, even though it is clearly dark enough to require torches (4.2.40-43, 1.4.43-45). Although Mercutio searches for Romeo for a while after the party, he is in the end, as his name implies, volatile rather than constant: his eventual decision to go home to his “truckle-bed” contrasts with his friend’s determination to pursue his courtship of Juliet through the night (2.1.39-40, 2.3.41-43). Whereas the coolness of night is associated with the restraint which characterises constant passion, the duels are triggered by Mercutio’s insistence on staying out when “the day is hot,” and “the mad blood [is] stirring” (3.1.1-4).

As with Juliet’s earlier “boundless” joy, she feels that “no words can that woe sound” when she hears of Romeo’s banishment, since it has “no limit, measure, bound” (2.2.133-35, 3.2.125-26). As always in this play, however, her suffering serves to sharpen and focus her passion, in this case impelling her to prioritise it over her loyalty to her family. Juliet is only affected by the killing of Tybalt insofar as it seems for a moment to show Romeo’s perfidy, and even this concern is quickly overshadowed by her grief over her lover’s banishment (3.2.71-137). By contrast, the less passionate nurse, whose attachments, although deep, resemble those of Tybalt and the servants in that they are partly bound up with her loyalty to the household as a whole, cannot understand the power of a mature erotic choice to override family ties. Juliet’s intransigent loyalty can only stem from the trust which is generated by a reciprocal, perfectly equitable expression of need and care: thus, her expectation of receiving “comfort” from Romeo is balanced by her understanding that she must send him her ring in order to reassure her “true knight” of her continuing devotion (3.2.138-42).

Such is Romeo’s sympathy with Juliet’s desperate desire to prolong their one night together that he would doubtless have agreed to “stay and die” because his beloved “wills it so,” if she had pushed the point (3.5.1-25). By the same token, however, Juliet’s concern to protect her beloved ultimately forces her to heed his warning that morning is approaching (3.5.26-35). This apparently trivial conversation in fact encapsulates the whole play, since it demonstrates the process by which the lovers’ determination to prioritise their sympathetic rapport over their self-love can manifest itself either as bold courage or staunch self-restraint, according to whether it is fear or desire which threatens to divide them. As we have seen, this overriding, mutual sympathy provides a direct contrast to the ambivalent care offered by Capulet and the nurse later in the same scene. The interchangeability of the roles which the lovers play underlines the fact that the strength of the relationship is derived from the perfectly equitable nature of their mutual care: whereas earlier it was Romeo who instantly complied with his mistress’s refusal to grant him any immediate sensual “satisfaction,” it is now Juliet who quickly moderates her desire to keep him by her side in response to her beloved’s gentle hint that he should be gone (see 2.2.125-27).

Juliet presents herself initially as a “soft” victim of fate, as she calls on her nurse in a child-like manner to help her to avoid marrying Paris, but the subsequent conversation teaches her that the days when she could be protected from suffering by her guardian’s “comfort” are over (3.5.204-12, 3.5.235-42). From the broadest point of view, Juliet’s separation from her family at this point in the play is simply the culmination of a natural process which began with the nurse’s inability to soothe the inevitable pain of her weaning (1.3.24-32). The nurse could not have helped her even if she had responded to her plea more sensitively, for mature attachments necessarily involve a staunch, self-reliant endurance, as Juliet’s infant self unwittingly acknowledges when she agrees that she will choose to “fall backward when [she has] more wit” (1.3.40-48). The nurse’s husband’s joke makes the same point as the Queen Mab speech in the same misleadingly bawdy way: Juliet will become one of those maids whom desire itself inevitably “presses…and learns them first to bear” (1.4.92-94).

By the time Juliet speaks to Friar Lawrence she is able to frame her request for help in such a way as to foreground her growing sense of autonomy: she presents herself now as an “umpeer, arbitrating” the discussion, with the final power to decide whether the friar’s “remedy” is sufficient to enable her to continue to live (4.1.50-67). Juliet has now thoroughly freed herself from the comfortable dependence of childhood, just as Romeo’s affair with Rosaline taught him to contain his grief, since attempts to pity him merely served to “propagate” his tears (1.1.185-92).[[16]](#endnote-28) The ultimate expression of this courageous self-reliance is, “if all else fail, [her] power to die”: almost in accordance with the nurse’s husband’s prediction, she is ready to “leap…from off the battlements” in order to preserve her “true heart” from “treacherous revolt” (3.5.242, 4.1.77-88, 4.1.50-67). The constant juxtaposition of love and death throughout the play hints that in extreme circumstances passionate souls are bound to prioritise their desire for the ultimate good above even the most deeply engrained manifestations of self-love (see, for instance, 1.5.134-35, 2.2.77-78, 2.4.13-16, 2.6.6-8, 3.2.21-25, 3.2.136-37, 3.5.24, 3.5.93-95, 3.5.140, 3.5.200-01, 4.1.77-88, 4.5.35-40, 5.1.6-9, 5.1.34, 5.3.92-119).[[17]](#endnote-29)

Although, ironically, mature passion itself involves surrendering even more abjectly to a beloved–as when Romeo longs to be Juliet’s tame bird (2.2.182)–this “press[ing]” or “fall[ing] backward” is very different from a child-like dependency, because it almost immediately imposes a commensurate burden of care, as lovers seek to safeguard the satisfactions of an intimate attachment both from internal dissonance and external threats. From one point of view the play is therefore a Bildungsroman, as the extreme youth of the protagonists implies, the aim of which is to demonstrate how the lovers are impelled to ascend the erotic hierarchy by an entirely natural–albeit in this case of course highly accelerated–evolution of passion, as a child-like longing to possess the beloved absolutely for oneself progressively imposes an austere self-denial.

Juliet does not overcome the fears which make her hesitate to execute the friar’s plan until it suddenly occurs to her in her fevered state that she might be able to protect Romeo from Tybalt’s vengeful ghost in the tomb -presumably as a ghost herself, since she is convinced that drinking the potion is tantamount to committing suicide (4.3.24-58). “Love give[s] [her] strength,” it seems, because at the top of Queen Mab’s hierarchy the perfectly sympathetic unity which lovers crave can only be achieved by offering the beloved an absolutely self-denying care (4.1.125). Juliet foregrounds this care so determinedly in this passionate soliloquy that she does not even bother to mention her own need for Romeo as a motive to proceed with the plan, although this is clearly her underlying motive. Soon of course she will commit suicide in earnest, without wasting time or words, and of necessity in an even more boldly courageous manner than Romeo, simply in order to stay with her “true love” (5.3.160-70).

Although the banished Romeo’s dreams are of being reunited with Juliet and revived by her kisses, they also show how the intensity of his mingled need and care sustains him even in her absence: he realises that “love’s shadows are so rich in joy” even without “love itself possess’d,” and asks, “How doth my Juliet…for nothing can be ill if she is well” (5.1.1-16). His quiet determination to kill himself after hearing the news of Juliet’s death is the supreme example of the courageous sacrifices which the “choking gall” of love progressively drives him to make in order to maintain the bond which is so vital to his happiness: having moderated his sexual desire and stripped away his pride, his desire to preserve his sense of sympathetic unity with his beloved now overrides his instinct for survival itself.[[18]](#endnote-30) His single exclamation, “Then I defy you, stars!” and his reference to the poison as a “cordial” and a “pilot” confirm that he sees his suicide as a stalwart assertion of his loyalty rather than an act of despair, as it would have been if he had actually been allowed to stab himself in act 3, scene 3 (5.1.24, 5.1.85-86, 5.1.117).

Shakespeare sheds an indirect light on his reserved hero’s state of mind at this point by constructing an implicit parallel between the apothecary’s motives for selling the poison and Romeo’s for buying it: the apothecary’s extreme hunger drives him to overcome his fear of being put to death for making this illegal sale in just the same way as Romeo’s need to maintain the connection which provides him with such vital emotional sustenance impels him to override his own instinct for survival (5.1.66-84). As Juliet did when taking the potion which she feared would kill her, Romeo foregrounds his sympathetic care as he commits suicide, since it is this that has fostered the perfectly harmonious rapport which he treasures, although at the same time he does acknowledge his need to possess her forever: he will “stay with” her in “this palace of dim night,” for “fear” that death might be preserving her “here in dark to be his paramour” (compare 5.3.102-09 and 4.3.55-57).

Thus, in some ways Romeo’s sacrifices resemble those of Capulet and the nurse as they overcome their reluctance to encourage Juliet to marry: love forces all three characters to fall back on the strategy that offers them the best chance of preserving their bond with Juliet, in however attenuated a form and by however painful a means. However, as we have seen, Romeo is able to go much further than these parental figures: because he has found fulfilment through a fully reciprocated love, he is motivated to align himself with Juliet in a sympathetic unity which remains steadfast even in the face of a physical bereavement, the fear of which stunts and contorts the passionate devotion of Capulet and the nurse. Romeo and Juliet’s suicides represent an extreme illustration of the courageous sacrifices which all those who experience the sustaining power of intimate devotion are necessarily driven to make, often of course in much more humdrum and unobtrusive ways, as they exercise the self-denying care upon which any such intimacy must be founded.

To sum up: truly passionate lovers feel impelled to shoulder a burden of self-denying care in order to fulfil their need to unite with their beloved. They ascend the erotic hierarchy, as loss and the fear of loss of this ultimate good, teach them to prioritise the reciprocal expressions of need and care by which it is sustained above all their other passions; in particular, sexual desire, which they carefully regulate because of its intrinsically fleeting nature, and pride, which Romeo rejects as incompatible with his self-effacing devotion. While such lovers are therefore distinguished most of all by the stalwart self-restraint which they habitually exercise within the relationship, they can also demonstrate great boldness in confronting external obstacles: passion not only drives young lovers to substitute a brave self-reliance for the comfortable, self-absorbed dependency of childhood, but may ultimately impel them to defy all conventional constraints, apart from those, like the decorum of courtship and the sacrament of marriage, which might facilitate a lasting devotion. Thus, the determination of lovers to eschew divisive passions can manifest itself equally as bold defiance of fear or staunch restraint of desire as the occasion demands. Romeo and Juliet’s suicides expose the essential nature of the courage of love by taking the self-denial which all passionate lovers are driven to display–often of course in much more prosaic ways–to its logical extreme.

Slightly lower down the hierarchy than the eponymous lovers, many passionate characters stumble, as it were, towards the ultimate good, often exercising a staunch self-denial, but falling short of the intransigently courageous devotion which a fully sympathetic intimacy demands. Ironically, it is precisely because the parental figures in the play naturally foreground their protective care at the expense of their own needs–in the knowledge that their child must eventually separate from them in order to fulfil their own desire for a fully reciprocal attachment–that their concern tends to be restricted to material support, or even stunted by an unacknowledged resentment, for it is beyond the scope of human nature to offer a fully sympathetic care without at least the hope of it being reciprocated. However, Capulet’s posthumous plea for his daughter’s forgiveness perhaps hints that a relationship which is bound to be unequal at first can eventually under the right circumstances be transmuted into one of mutual care and need.

The spirited characters are more consistently assertive than their passionate counterparts, since they usually form diffuse, relatively superficial allegiances, which actively encourage their proud concern to earn the respect of their tribe -although passionate lovers may sometimes show even more boldness, since their courage stems from needs which can at times take priority over their own survival. The more passionate of these spirited characters experience an underlying desire for deep intimacy, but attempt to repress this need in order to avoid having to devote themselves to a beloved in a manner that they dismiss as abjectly servile. Ironically, such characters, who pride themselves on their boldness, are in fact cowed by the austere imperatives of love, which demand a more obdurate and self-denying fortitude than proud displays of bravery.

The fact that neither Mercutio nor Capulet can offer stalwart, devoted care, since they both avoid expressing their real needs–albeit for very different reasons–suggests that the fully reciprocal intimacy which alone can generate such courageous care is more easily achieved by romantic lovers than by parents or friends, presumably because sexual attraction often facilitates a relatively unreserved expression of mutual desire. However, since such attraction is presented as an ephemeral catalyst, rather than as an essential element of lasting attachments, it seems likely that in many instances passionate friends and parents can find other, perhaps more circuitous, ways of generating the intimacy which they crave.

Although their pain is more superficial and less chronic than that of the lovers, Mercutio and Tybalt nevertheless clearly suffer more than stolid characters such as Benvolio, Lady Capulet and the friar, who survive the calamitous events of the play unscathed because they are generally ruled by prudent self-interest. There are, however, gradations even within this latter group, as there are in the other two. Just as Mercutio is more passionate than Tybalt and the servants, and the eponymous lovers more so than Capulet and the nurse, so Friar Lawrence proves himself to be more passionate than Lady Capulet or Benvolio, as he begins to sympathise with Juliet’s pain. However, the contrast between his abject flight at the end of the play and Juliet’s refusal to desert Romeo implies that piety and philosophy lack the power of the lovers’ intransigent passion to override prudent self-interest. Thus, Shakespeare suggests that a truly courageous self-denial is generated neither by reason, nor by Christian charity, nor by spirited, honourable camaraderie, nor even usually by devoted parenthood, but rather by a need for intimate devotion which is so intense as to override any passion which threatens to disrupt the desired unity.

Although the play focuses on courage, it therefore draws together all the key elements of Shakespeare’s philosophy as it is explicated on this website: *Romeo and Juliet* portrays the ultimate good more directly, if less systematically than *As You Like It*, and echoes *Twelfth Night* in showing that a fully courageous pursuit of this good can only be motivated by the promise of a perfectly equitable, reciprocal attachment; while implying that such an attachment involves restraining physical passion and resisting the distraction of proud, spirited nobility -subjects covered more fully in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Hamlet* respectively. The parallel between the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* and the story of Pyramus and Thisbe provides a hint that the link between the courage and moderation of lovers is particularly intimate, since both involve restraining deeply embedded instincts, and since, as we have seen, the self-control which lovers must exercise in order to sustain their sympathetic alignment itself demands a great deal of patient fortitude. This overview suggests that Shakespeare structures his thought around the four classical virtues, since *Romeo and Juliet,* *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Twelfth Night* focus respectively on courage, moderation and justice, although it should be noted at this point that there is no mature play devoted to the wisdom of love; perhaps because its excellence can only be grasped intuitively, or perhaps because the primary concern of all his major work is to explore the most prudent means by which wise lovers can achieve this intuited good, as well as the inadequacy of all alternative goals.

1. For the friar’s stolid incomprehension, see D. A. Traversi, “An Approach to Shakespeare,” in Andrews, “*Romeo and Juliet*”*: Critical Essays*: 24-6, 30-31. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
2. M. M. Mahood describes the play as having “the equilibrium of great tragedy” in “Shakespeare’s Wordplay,” in Andrews, “*Romeo and Juliet*”*: Critical Essays*, 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
3. For the friar’s cowardice, see James C. Bryant, “The Problematic Friar in *Romeo and Juliet*,” in Andrews, “*Romeo and Juliet*”*: Critical Essays*: 330-31. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
4. For the tensions in Mercutio’s speech, see Coppélia Kahn, “Coming of Age in Verona,” in Andrews, “*Romeo and Juliet*”*: Critical Essays*: 343. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
5. The Zeffirelli film hints at this reading of the play. See Jack Jorgens, “Franco Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet*,” in Andrews, “*Romeo and Juliet*”*: Critical Essays*: 168. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
6. Norman Holland, “Mercutio, Mine Own Son, the Dentist,” in *Essays on Shakespeare*, ed. Gordon Ross Smith (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1965): 3-14. This essay exposes the fear of love which underlies Mercutio’s aggressive bawdry. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
7. Barbara Everett, “*Romeo and Juliet*: The Nurse’s Story,” *Critical Quarterly*, Summer (1972): 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
8. See T. J. L. Cribb, “The Unity of *Romeo and Juliet*,” in Taylor and Loughrey, *Shakespeare’s Early Tragedies; A Casebook*: 183 et passim, for the links between Shakespeare’s thought and Neoplatonic conceptions of the ladder of love, where “the vulgar lead[s] to the heavenly.” [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
9. Juliet’s prudence is discussed in D. A. Traversi, “An Approach to Shakespeare,” in Andrews, “*Romeo and Juliet*”*: Critical Essays*: 19-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
10. For Romeo’s substitution of a gentle humility for his former assertiveness see Marianne Novy, “Violence, Love, and Gender in *Romeo and Juliet*,” in Andrews, “*Romeo and Juliet*”*: Critical Essays*: 360-62. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
11. For the importance of the reciprocity of Romeo and Juliet’s love see Kiernan Ryan, “’The Murdering Word’,” in “*Romeo and Juliet,*” New Casebook series, ed. R. S. White (New York: Palgrave, 2001): 123. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
12. Coppélia Kahn, “Coming of Age in Verona,” in Andrews, “*Romeo and Juliet*”*: Critical Essays*: 349. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
13. D. A. Traversi, “An Approach to Shakespeare” in Andrews, “*Romeo and Juliet*”*: Critical Essays*: 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
14. For the timing of the play see J. W. Draper, “Shakespeare’s Star-Crossed Lovers,” in Andrews, “*Romeo and Juliet*”*: Critical Essays*: 298. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
15. Marjorie Garber, “*Romeo and Juliet*: Patterns and Paradigms,” in Andrews, “*Romeo and Juliet*”*: Critical Essays*: 127-28 - “tragic darkness…throw[s] the brilliance of the lovers (and their love) into sharp relief.” [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
16. Marjorie Garber, “*Romeo and Juliet*: Patterns and Paradigms,” in Andrews, “*Romeo and Juliet,*”: *Critical Essays*: 123. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
17. See Coppélia Kahn, “Coming of Age in Verona” in Andrews, “*Romeo and Juliet*”: *Critical Essays*: 354-55, for the pervasive link between love and death. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
18. For the lovers’ certainty that their love is the ultimate good see William Hazlitt (1817); *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays* (Great Britain: Amazon, 2021): 136-41. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)