CIVIL BLOOD

WHY ARE THE CAPULETS AND MONTAGUES AT WAR?

Romeo and Juliet's Prologue speaks of an 'ancient grudge', and in the play's opening sequence we watch that grudge 'break to new mutiny'. One minute, loutish bully-boys, servants from both houses, are hanging around the streets taunting each other with crude insults and obscene gestures. The next minute, the entire city, from lowest lackey to the Prince himself, is in deadly uproar: servingmen and kinsmen, citizens sucked into the fray, even the two patriarchs, Montague and Capulet, are brawling in the street. We know the immediate cause: an 'airy word'. (An 'airy word'? Laying waste to a city? Later on, it only takes 'a word' to trigger the fight that ends Mercutio's life.) But what's behind it? Why the implacable hatred running on from generation to generation? A business deal gone sour? Lost property? Lost lives? A failed inter-family marriage? We never know.

But we do know from the Prologue that violence is at home in Verona. It's a place where 'civil blood makes civil hands unclean'. But how 'civil' is a Verona where acts of violence are as 'accustomed' as acts of civil celebration – like Capulet's feast? Each new 'mutiny' may be an outrage, but the 'ancient' feud feels embedded in the fabric of the city, played out in urban space, flaunted on the surfaces of things. Maybe, then, the idealistic notion that civilisation and violence are antithetical is wrong. Maybe the city doesn't expel violence but encloses it. Maybe violence is constitutive of civilisation. The question then becomes how the city manages it.

It might help if Verona could see violence as something you grew out of, a disease of adolescence; its cure, time. But that's not how it works in Verona. Age is as stuck on violence as youth is. Old geezers, the 'ancientry' – whose wives say they'd be better armed with crutches than swords – threaten each other in the streets. Reverend matrons later kneel in those same streets and shrill for vengeance. Lady Capulet, seeing Tybalt violently killed, wants Romeo violently dead: 'For blood of ours shed blood of Montague'. The moment they are crossed, fathers posture and rant like adolescents. It's hard to tell who's more the furious 'boy', Tybalt detecting Romeo gate-crashing the Capulet ball and instantly reaching for his rapier to run him through, or old Capulet slapping young Tybalt down: 'What, goodman boy! … Am I the master here, or you? …princox, go!' More shocking is the extravagant violence the 'careful' father unleashes upon the child, the thirteen-year-old daughter he yesterday called 'the hopeful lady of my earth' and thought too young for marriage – but today thinks ripe. When Juliet balks, Capulet explodes, threatening to expose her in public like a strumpet: 'Mistress minion you,…fettle your fine joints 'gainst Thursday next … Or I will drag thee on a hurdle thither'. Most shocking of all, this parental violence goes by the name of love.

Is that a contradiction? Not in a play where love and violence share a common language, work toward the same conclusion. Like the feud, love releases violent energies in Verona. There's the lewd, crude punning of Samson and Gregory about 'tools' and 'weapons', 'standing' and 'thrusting', where one kind of penetration doubles for another. There's Mercutio's advice to 'Prick love for pricking', and the Friar's warning that 'violent delights have violent ends': 'like fire and powder', 'as they kiss', they 'consume'.

At the end, Verona – in uproar – is back on the streets, running 'with open outcry' to the Capulets' monument where they stand, watching, listening, surveying a scene of carnage – a civic scene. Dead, the city's young won't out-grow their violent impulses. But maybe the city's elders, memorialising their loves, will recognise something: that violence inevitably recoils upon the violent; that to end the violence, they'll have to make sacrifices. The hatreds they've nurtured as lovingly as children: they'll have to give them up – like the lives of Romeo and Juliet.

Watching the acts of violence that constitute *Romeo and Juliet* we might reflect upon our role – the spectator's role – in the theatre. Why do we look? How do we look? What is the point of re-enacting, remembering violence through play? The Greeks, who invented it, understood theatre-going as a civic responsibility and the theatre as a place where the city did serious thinking in public – the kind Verona needs to do. Theatre, they saw, was a place to lodge our savage instincts. And by releasing them, to contain those instincts in the rituals of performance. Consider this spatial coincidence: at the end of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Athene, needing to pacify the Furies (those blood-battening grudge-hags who follow feuds and track vendettas and who've vowed to lay waste to the city), doesn't send them packing. She invites them to stay, offering them a home in a cave underneath the Acropolis. The Acropolis. That's the city centre! That's the site of the theatre! We get the point. Theatre is built over the pit. It straddles the Fury-ous violence lodged at civilisation's core.

Shakespeare's age knew this too. Theatre's purpose, according to Ben Jonson, was to 'imitate justice and instruct to life'; according to Prince Hamlet, to show 'the very age and body of the time his form and pressure'. In the theatre, 'Minding true things by what their mockeries be', as *Henry V*'s Chorus tells us, we're submitted to the terrible consequences of our brutality – but saved from its 'real' experience. Violence in jest – remembered, re-enacted – can perform a kind of miracle upon us. It can make us, like Edgar in *King Lear*, grow 'pregnant to good pity.' It can 'instruct to life.'

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