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Motion and Mercutio in Romeo and Juliet

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Motion and Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*

Daryl W. Palmer

There is nothing permanent that is not true, what can be true that is uncertain? How can that be certain, that stands upon uncertain grounds? ¹

It is by now a commonplace in modern scholarship that drama, particularly Tudor drama, poses questions, rehearses familiar debates, and even speculates about mere possibilities.² In 1954, Madeleine Doran spelled out some of the ways in which debate "affected the structure of Elizabethan drama."³ In turn, Joel B. Altman, having eloquently extended Doran's examination, concludes that "the plays functioned as media of intellectual and emotional exploration for minds that were accustomed to examine the many sides of a given theme, to entertain opposing ideals, and by so exercising the understanding, to move toward some fuller apprehension of truth that could be discerned only through the total action of the drama."⁴ Altman points to Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Luces* (c. 1490) as an exemplar of this practice. Although the interlude instructs and entertains, "the center of interest has shifted from demonstration to inquiry. The action develops not from an abstract assertion, but from a specific question: who is the nobler man, Cornelius or Gaius?"⁵ By the time William Shakespeare began to write his plays, inquiry was an essential part of dramatic construction. So Juliet asks, "What's in a name?"⁶ *Hamlet* opens with the question: "Who's [End Page 540] there?" (1.1.1), and achieves a kind of apotheosis in the figure of its hero: "To be, or not to be, that is the question . . ." (3.1.55). Everyone recognizes these familiar questions, and we know (or think we know) how to describe the most viable answers. I want to suggest, however, that this familiarity has dulled our appreciation of the drama's interrogative range. As a way of resisting this tendency, I want to argue that Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* takes up an ancient conversation about *motion*, a dialog that originates with the pre-Socratics. This is not to say that the play is ultimately about motion. It obviously engages a panoply of thematic materials. I have simply chosen, in this limited space, to concentrate on the way the playwright stages his questioning as a kind of fencing lesson. My goal is to produce neither a "reading" of the play nor an allegory of philosophy, but rather to recollect the ways in which Shakespeare's drama qualifies and extends an ancient interrogative tradition. In so doing, I follow Stanley Cavell who maintains "that Shakespeare could not be who he is—the burden of the name of the

greatest writer in the language, the creature of the greatest ordering of English—unless his writing is engaging the depth of the philosophical preoccupations of his culture."⁷

Some of the most venerable documents of Western philosophy fix on the problem of motion. If we go back more than 2,300 years, we come upon Plato's *Theaetetus*, in which Socrates explains a "first principle" to the title character, namely that "the universe really is motion and nothing else."⁸ A kind of history lesson in ontology and epistemology, this tentative explanation has its origins in Heraclitus or Empedocles or Protagoras or some combination of the aforementioned. Perhaps the most famous expression of this ideal comes from Heraclitus: "You cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters and yet others go ever flowing on."⁹ More to the point is the following declaration from the same philosopher: "Everything flows and nothing abides; everything gives way and nothing stays fixed."¹⁰ In this spirit, Protagoras declares, "All matter is in a state of flux."¹¹ Such precedents provide the backdrop for Socrates in the *Theaetetus* as he summarizes: "The point is that all these things are, as we were saying, in motion, but there is a quickness or slowness in their motion" (*Thea*, 156c). In this historical spirit, he identifies "a tradition from the ancients, who hid their meaning from the common herd in poetical figures, that Oceanus and Tethys, the source of all things, are flowing streams and nothing is at rest" (*Thea*, 180d–e).

To...

DARYL W. PALMER

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Motion and mercurio in Romeo and Juliet, harmony, without changing the concept outlined above, gives a household contract, although this fact needs further careful experimental verification.

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