

## Romeo and Juliet (Spring 2007)

We diminish Shakespeare's most famous lovers at our own peril. The feuding Montagues and Capulets need five whole acts to learn this, and so do we—at least if all we recall of the play is the bare-bones plot (boy and girl meet, make love, and die), together with the litany of Famous Quotes, now clichéd and out of context. Romeo and Juliet are not truly in love but in lust, so goes the refrain, or they love the idea of being in love; they are not tragic heroes but mere victims of (pick your poison) pigheaded authority, impetuous youth, cruel fate, or plain bad timing. We do not leave the theatre awed by the doom of great spirits; the effect of their double suicide is not cathartic but pathetic, pitiable. We may even feign gratitude for their deaths, as does W. H. Auden when he argues, “If [Romeo and Juliet] become a married couple, there will be no more wonderful speeches—and a good thing, too. Then the real tasks of life will begin, with which art has surprisingly little to do” [48].

Surely no one wants to imagine Romeo, balding and beer-bellied, sighing for lost youth like his unsuspecting father-in-law. (“I have seen the day / That I have worn a visor and could tell / A whispering tale in a fair lady's ear, / Such as would please. 'Tis gone, 'tis gone, 'tis gone!” [I.v.21–4].) Or a desiccated Juliet, preferring suitors to her own daughter by appropriating her mother's trite rhymes and tortured metaphors. (“This precious book of love, this unbound lover, / To beautify him only lacks a cover. . . . / That book in many's eyes doth share the glory, / That in gold clasps locks in the golden story” [I.iii.87–92].) Fortunately, the play Shakespeare wrote consumes such petty objections in a crucible of passion and poetry. More than simply dramatize the experience of romantic love, *Romeo and Juliet* helps to shape that experience for us. How many

expectations—what it must feel like to fall in love and be loved in return—were born, are born, of the union of these “star-crossed lovers” [Prologue, 6] and its shattering consequences?

### Juliet

I begin with Juliet because she most profoundly articulates those consequences, though when first we meet her she has less to say—the scene belongs to her mother and the garrulous nurse:

*Capulet's Wife:* Nurse, where's my daughter? Call her forth to me.  
*Nurse:* Now, by my maidenhead at twelve year old,  
 I bade her come. What, lamb! what, ladybird!  
 God forbid. Where's this girl? What, Juliet!  
*Juliet:* How now? Who calls?  
*Nurse:* Your mother.  
*Juliet:* Madam, I am here.  
 What is your will?  
*Capulet's Wife:* This is the matter—nurse, give leave awhile,  
 We must talk in secret. Nurse, come back again;  
 I have remembered me, thou's hear our counsel.

[I.iii.1–9]

The immediacy with which Capulet's wife calls back the nurse suggests mother and daughter do not “talk in secret” often. So does the ensuing monologue; for all her simple-mindedness, the nurse makes clear who raised the child while “My lord and you were then at Mantua” [I.iii.28]. Juliet finally, gently silences the nurse so her mother may speak again:

*Capulet's Wife:* Tell me, daughter Juliet,  
 How stands your disposition to be married?  
*Juliet:* It is an honor that I dream not of.

[I.iii.64–6]

A carefully crafted reply. Naturally, the nurse misinterprets Juliet's tact (“An honor? Were not I thine only nurse, / I would say thou hadst sucked wisdom from thy

teat” [I.iii.67–8]), whereupon Capulet’s wife recites her insipid ode to the would-be bridegroom, Paris. Though Juliet speaks only three more lines in the scene, they likewise hint at the maturity that soon shall dazzle Romeo (and the audience):

*Capulet’s Wife:* Speak briefly, can you like of Paris’ love?

*Juliet:* I’ll look to like, if looking liking move;

But no more deep will I endart mine eye

Than your consent gives strength to make it fly.

[I.iii.96–9]

Of course, Juliet soon discovers beyond all doubt that “looking liking move”; the catch is she looks at Romeo, not Paris. And when this miracle happens, we may wonder how anything could possibly have prepared her for it . . . or prepared the language she shall use to apprehend it. Her mother spouts sentimental aphorisms; the nurse prefers bawdy jokes (“Women grow by men,” har har [I.iii.95]). Capulet’s gloomy perspective—“And too soon marred are those so early made [mothers]” [I.ii.13]—was likely shaped by personal experience; regardless, he doesn’t even speak to his daughter until late in Act III, and then only to bully her into accepting the political marriage he has arranged. We are told Juliet “loved her kinsman Tybalt dearly” [III.iv.3], but a man who by his own admission “hate[s] the word [‘peace’] / As I hate hell” [I.i.68–9] can scarcely be a role model for lovers.

Yet when all of a sudden and without warning a stranger whispers in her ear the first quatrain of a sonnet, Juliet finds the inspiration not only to match his conceit but to build upon it:

*Romeo:* If I profane with my unworhiest hand

This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:

My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand

To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

*Juliet:* Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,

Which mannerly devotion shows in this;

For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,  
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

[I.v.94–101]

Her reply—only the sixth time she has spoken in the play—is ingenious, simultaneously modest and self-flattering (she accepts the title of “saint,” after all), chaste yet emboldening, as Romeo—despite her “saint”-like objections—completes the sonnet and translates words to action:

*Romeo:* Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

*Juliet:* Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

*Romeo:* O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do!

They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

*Juliet:* Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

*Romeo:* Then move not while my prayer's effect I take.

[I.v.102–7]

Here they kiss. “Thus from my lips, by thine my sin is purged,” he murmurs, and we may interpret her reply—“Then have my lips the sin that they have took”—as a request for him to “purge” that “sin” by kissing her again [I.v.108–9]; certainly this is how Romeo interprets it. She closes with the famous “You kiss by th' book” [I.v.111], demolishing—and remaking—her mother's artificial image from before.

But alas! Romeo is a “a loathed enemy,” a Montague—“My only love, sprung from my only hate,” Juliet cries [I.v.142 & 139], though in fact her father acknowledges Romeo to be “a virtuous and well-governed youth” [I.v.69]. (Has Capulet grown weary of feuding? He confesses to Paris, “’tis not hard, I think, / For men so old as we to keep the peace” [I.ii.2–3].) Upon learning the identity of his newfound love, Romeo is momentarily troubled (“O dear account! my life is my foe's debt” [I.v.119]), then forgets the whole matter until Juliet—and eventually Tybalt—reminds him. In contrast, Juliet fixates on the conflict, inspiring perhaps the most memorable lines in the play:

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.  
 Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.  
 What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,  
 Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part  
 Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!  
 What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
 By any other word would smell as sweet.

[II.ii.38–44]

Hiding below in the orchard, unbeknownst, Romeo hears this and bursts forth. “Call me but love, and I’ll be new baptized,” he proclaims. “Henceforth I never will be Romeo” [II.ii.50–1]. This does not reassure her . . . though how much of her professed fear is motivated by a desire to paint the scene in the most thrilling colors? Romeo is more transparent:

*Juliet:* How camest thou hither, tell me, and wherefore?  
 The orchard walls are high and hard to climb,  
 And the place death, considering who thou art,  
 If any of my kinsmen find thee here.

*Romeo:* With love's light wings did I o'erperch these walls;  
 For stony limits cannot hold love out,  
 And what love can do, that dares love attempt.  
 Therefore thy kinsmen are no stop to me.

*Juliet:* If they do see thee, they will murder thee.

*Romeo:* Alack, there lies more peril in thine eye  
 Than twenty of their swords! Look thou but sweet,  
 And I am proof against their enmity.

*Juliet:* I would not for the world they saw thee here.

[II.ii.62–74]

In truth, Juliet has greater worries than deadly kinsmen. In a speech that leaps dizzily from topic to topic [II.ii.85–106], two connecting threads appear: First, that by giving her love so eagerly to Romeo she may appear “fond” or “light” [II.ii.98 & 99]; second, that Romeo “mayst prove false” [II.ii.92]. “At lovers’ perjuries, / They say Jove laughs” [II.ii.92–3], she reflects, then vows to “prove more true / Than those that have more cunning to be strange” [II.ii.100–1]. Perhaps it is in these lines we most hear the

influences of home: of the nurse, with her cheerful obscenities; of her (estranged?) parents, who do not exchange one loving word; of the hot-blooded, single-minded Tybalt; of the servants, who in the opening scene jest so casually of “thrust[ing] maids to the wall” and “cut[ting] off their [maiden]heads” [I.i.14–25].

Romeo tries to assuage her fears, vowing “by yonder blessed moon . . . / That tips with silver all these fruit-tree tops” [II.ii.107–8], but the image is stock (no doubt lifted from a favorite sonnet), and Juliet rejects it:

*Juliet:* O, swear not by the moon, th’ inconstant moon,  
That monthly changes in her circled orb,  
Lest that thy love prove likewise variable.

*Romeo:* What shall I swear by?

*Juliet:* Do not swear at all,  
Or if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self,  
Which is the god of my idolatry,  
And I’ll believe thee.

*Romeo:* If my heart’s dear love—

*Juliet:* Well, do not swear.

[II.ii.109–16]

Does he stumble on his half-line, helplessly deprived of his arsenal of fine phrases? Or does she cut him off, realizing that words, however lovely, are empty proofs? No longer a passive saint, Juliet is becoming a tutor, teaching her naïve pupil how to woo her. But the experience of love floods her with new ideas and feelings, and she is wise enough to let them settle:

Although I joy in thee,  
I have no joy of this contract tonight.  
It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden;  
Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be  
Ere one can say “It lightens.” Sweet, good night!  
This bud of love, by summer’s ripening breath,  
May prove a beauteous flow’r when next we meet.

[II.ii.116–22]

This is the spell of love, not lust, and there is still more magic in the night. As

Juliet prepares to return inside, Romeo protests: “O, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?” He does not mean sexually, though Juliet’s startled reply—“What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?”—suggests she thinks otherwise; instead, he requests “Th’ exchange of thy love’s faithful vow for mine” . . . apparently forgetting that only moments before she had dismissed all such swearing. Now she indulges rather than chides him, though he still cannot fully grasp her meaning:

*Juliet:* I gave thee mine before thou didst request it;  
 And yet I would it were to give again.  
*Romeo:* Wouldst thou withdraw it? For what purpose, love?  
*Juliet:* But to be frank and give it thee again.

[II.ii.125–31]

Her generosity sparks a crucial realization: “And yet I wish but for the thing I have.” What follows is even more astonishing:

My bounty is as boundless as the sea,  
 My love as deep; the more I give to thee,  
 The more I have, for both are infinite.

[II.ii.132–5]

This is love so pure it seems divine. The question posed by *Romeo and Juliet* is how long such bliss may be sustained. Indeed, no sooner does Juliet say “infinite” than the nurse calls from within. The mood is broken, and Romeo is more prescient than he knows when he says, “I am afeard, / Being in night, all this is but a dream, / Too flattering-sweet to be substantial” [II.ii.139–41].

As though to prove her substance, Juliet immediately reappears. “If that thy bent of love be honorable, / Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow,” she instructs him, “And all my fortunes at thy foot I’ll lay / And follow thee my lord throughout the world” [II.ii.143–8]. From “summer’s ripening breath” to marriage in twenty lines—is Juliet guilty of the very thing she warned against? We might excuse such rashness—if

indeed rashness it is—as youth’s privilege, or we may rationalize it: A traditional courtship hardly seems possible. But I find the best explanation in Juliet’s conclusion to her proposal, quoted above: “And all my fortunes at thy foot I’ll lay / And follow thee my lord throughout the world.” Romeo expresses a similar sentiment earlier in the scene: “Call me but love, and I’ll be new baptized. / Henceforth I never will be Romeo.” And again, following his banishment from Verona—and thus from Juliet: “There is no world without Verona walls, / But purgatory, torture, hell itself. / Hence banished is banished from the world, / And world’s exile is death” [III.iii.17–20].

In other words, for good and ill, falling in love does not merely set Romeo and Juliet apart from the world—it transports them to a new world, an Eden of two and two only. Why is Juliet so quick to propose marriage and Romeo so quick to accept? Who else, what else, exists for them?

I shall have more to say about Juliet, whose courage proves as remarkable as her bounty. But let us leave her in paradise a while longer, as we trace the growth of her partner—if not quite equal—in love:

### **Romeo**

Romeo—lovesick for the mortal-goddess Rosaline (who “in strong proof of chastity well armed, / From Love’s weak childish bow . . . lives unharmed” [I.i.209–10])—makes his first entrance on the heels of the street fight that opens the play, and the juxtaposition is apt. If the feud is thoughtless and devoid of purpose (no motive is ever suggested save “ancient grudge” [Prologue, 3]), our hero’s romantic poses are equally so, and not just because Rosaline shall never reciprocate. From his first speech Romeo goes comically out of his way to seem wise, as though it might validate his schoolboy crush:



Where shall we dine? O me! What fray was here?  
 Yet tell me not, for I have heard it all.  
 Here's much to do with hate, but more with love.  
 Why then, O brawling love, O loving hate,  
 O anything, of nothing first create!<sup>1</sup>  
 O heavy lightness, serious vanity,  
 Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms,  
 Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health,  
 Still-waking sleep, that is not what it is!  
 This love feel I, that feel no love in this.

[I.i.172–81]

What could have prompted this oration? His scene partner and cousin, Benvolio, just wants to grab breakfast. Buried in the paradoxes is an insight: A feud is sustained by love of feuding. Yet Romeo cannot talk of love and leave out his own suffering—on the contrary, he takes great pleasure in his pain. Benvolio's compassion ("I rather weep . . . / At thy good heart's oppression" [I.i.182–3]) gives Romeo one more excuse to do so:

This love that thou hast shown  
 Doth add more grief to too much of mine own.  
 Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs;  
 Being purged, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes;  
 Being vexed, a sea nourished with loving tears.  
 What is it else? A madness most discreet,  
 A choking gall, and a preserving sweet.

[I.i.187–93]

Again Romeo's preferred mode is paradox. An effective paradox can open the mind to the impossible; a whole catalogue, however, suggests a mind too dull to think precisely. For Romeo, language has become a crutch enabling him to deflect his feelings rather than honestly confront them. (Friar Laurence says as much when he chides Romeo for

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<sup>1</sup> Compare to this exchange between Romeo and Mercutio, three scenes later [I.iv.95–8]:

*Romeo:* Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace!  
 Thou talk'st of nothing.  
*Mercutio:* True, I talk of dreams;  
 Which are the children of an idle brain,  
 Begot of nothing but vain fantasy . . .

“doting, not . . . loving” [II.iii.82].)

Romeo’s language changes dramatically in the presence of Juliet—the first glimpse tells the whole tale:

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!  
 It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night  
 As a rich jewel in an Ethiop’s ear—  
 Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!  
 So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows  
 As yonder lady o’er her fellows shows.

[I.v.45–50]

Juliet, then, is not an impossibility but an ideal. Of course, this route too is dangerous—objects on pedestals fall easily down. Yet they also inspire. Romeo does not call Juliet “saint” because he cannot imagine a physical relationship with her. (The kisses that seal their meeting prove otherwise.) His diction recalls a previous conversation with Benvolio, when Romeo rashly swore never to prefer another woman to Rosaline: “When the devout religion of mine eye / Maintains such falsehood, then turn tears to fires; / And these, who, often drowned, could never die, / Transparent heretics, be burnt for liars” [I.ii.90–3]. The “sin” purged by Juliet’s sainted lips—he also says her touch shall “make blessed” his hand [I.v.52]—is his heresy for having once preferred a “crow” to a “snowy dove.” Once they have kissed, there is no more talk of his unworthiness.

Instead, he proceeds to build from her glorious parts a new world for them to inhabit. “Turn back, dull earth, and find thy center out” [II.i.2], he commands himself as he steals into the Capulet orchard to discover Juliet at her window, gazing skyward. Her person is a radiant light in the darkness—“It is the east,” he famously says, “and Juliet is the sun” [II.ii.3]—overwhelming “the envious moon, / Who is already sick and pale with grief / That [Juliet] her maid art far more fair than she” [II.ii.4–6]. Even the stars are

rendered superfluous by her eyes. “What if her eyes were there, they in her head?” he wonders:

The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars  
As daylight doth a lamp; her eyes in heaven  
Would through the airy region stream so bright  
That birds would sing and think it were not night.

[II.ii.18–22]

No longer the idle dreamer of the opening scenes, Romeo now acts decisively. It is Romeo who approaches Juliet at the masked ball, who initiates their first kiss, who scales the orchard walls and boldly proclaims his love. Even when the force of their desire makes action seem futile, the result is pure delight:

*Juliet:* Romeo!  
*Romeo:* My nyas?  
*Juliet:* What o’clock tomorrow  
Shall I send to thee?  
*Romeo:* By the hour of nine.  
*Juliet:* I will not fail. ’Tis twenty years till then.  
I have forgot why I did call thee back.  
*Romeo:* Let me stand here till thou remember it.  
*Juliet:* I shall forget, to have thee still stand there,  
Rememb’ring how I love thy company.  
*Romeo:* And I’ll still stay, to have thee still forget,  
Forgetting any other home but this.

[II.ii.168–76]

Yet this harmonious scene ends with a discordant note:

*Juliet:* ’Tis almost morning. I would have thee gone—  
And yet no farther than a wanton’s bird,  
That lets it hop a little from her hand,  
Like a poor prisoner in his twisted gyves,  
And with a silken thread plucks it back again,  
So loving-jealous of his liberty.  
*Romeo:* I would I were thy bird.  
*Juliet:* Sweet, so would I.  
Yet I should kill thee with much cherishing.

[II.ii.177–84]

A premonition of the darkness to come, and a reminder that even Juliet, who finds in

herself a universal plentitude, remains—at least in experience—a child. Nevertheless, it is Juliet, after so many strained attempts by Romeo, who finally hits upon the perfect paradox, words that have become indelibly linked to their doomed love: “Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow / That I shall say good night till it be morrow” [II.ii.185–6].

### **In Love and Tragedy**

The radiance of the balcony scene dissipates somewhat with daylight; as the lovers wait impatiently to be wed, they sound more like the adolescents they are. Romeo at first speaks only riddles to Friar Laurence: “I have been feasting with mine enemy, / Where on a sudden one hath wounded me / That’s by me wounded” [II.iii.49–51]; even after the friar objects (“Be plain, good son, and homely in thy drift” [II.iii.55]), words keep tumbling from Romeo’s mouth, with only the rhyme scheme for structure:

Then plainly know my heart’s dear love is set  
On the fair daughter of rich Capulet;  
As mine on hers, so hers is set on mine,  
And all combined, save what thou must combine  
By holy marriage. When, and where, and how  
We met, we wooed, and made exchange of vow,  
I’ll tell thee as we pass; but this I pray,  
That thou consent to marry us today.

[II.iii.57–64]

Meanwhile Juliet soliloquizes on impatience; unlike the more sophisticated soliloquys of later plays (*Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*), hers is less an attempt to understand herself than an expulsion of nervous energy as she awaits news from Romeo:

The clock struck nine when I did send the nurse;  
In half an hour she promised to return.  
Perchance she cannot meet him. That’s not so.  
O, she is lame! Love’s heralds should be thoughts,  
Which ten times faster glides than the sun’s beams  
Driving back shadows over low’ring hills.

Therefore do nimble-pinioned doves draw Love,  
 And therefore hath the wind-swift Cupid wings.  
 Now is the sun upon the highmost hill  
 Of this day's journey, and from nine till twelve  
 Is three long hours; yet she is not come.

[II.v.1–11]

She develops this theme a bit further, but either way—and unsurprisingly—the lovers lose inspiration when apart. Juliet recovers first; in the following scene, at Friar Laurence's cell, Romeo again craves aural proof of her love:

Ah, Juliet, if the measure of thy joy  
 Be heaped like mine, and that thy skill be more  
 To blazon it, then sweeten with thy breath  
 This neighbor air, and let rich music's tongue  
 Unfold the imagined happiness that both  
 Receive in either by this dear encounter.

[II.vi.24–9]

Whatever prompts this request—and in fairness to Romeo, I hear giddiness more than insecurity in his words—Juliet resists such extravagance:

Conceit, more rich in matter than in words,  
 Brags of his substance, not of ornament.  
 They are but beggars that can count their worth;  
 But my true love is grown to such excess  
 I cannot sum up sum of half my wealth.

[II.vi.30–4]

There is a touch of Cordelia in this check, but only a touch—Romeo is no Lear, and the friar's closing couplet (“For, by your leaves, you shall not stay alone / Till Holy Church incorporate two in one” [II.vi.36–7]) suggests the lovers are exchanging more than words. If the play were a comedy, the next step—after marriage—would be to reconcile the families.

Instead, when next we see Romeo and Juliet together, Mercutio and Tybalt are corpses and Romeo is a banished murderer. The tragedy follows hard upon the wedding,

and yet—*and yet!*—it is maddeningly close to not happening at all. As love for Juliet swells in his breast, Romeo begins to comprehend the boundlessness of which she spoke. Confronted in the street by Tybalt—who has been spoiling for a fight since Romeo crashed his uncle’s party—Romeo extends a peace offering to his new kinsman:

*Tybalt:* Romeo, the love I bear thee can afford  
No better term than this: thou art a villain.

*Romeo:* Tybalt, the reason that I have to love thee  
Doth much excuse the appertaining rage  
To such a greeting. Villain am I none.  
Therefore farewell. I see thou knowest me not.

*Tybalt:* Boy, this shall not excuse the injuries  
That thou hast done me; therefore turn and draw.

*Romeo:* I do protest I never injured thee,  
But love thee better than thou canst devise  
Till thou shalt know the reason of my love;  
And so, good Capulet, which name I tender  
As dearly as mine own, be satisfied.

[III.i.59–71]

A couple things to note here. First, Romeo reveals (at least to the audience) his intention to publicize his marriage; recall that Friar Laurence agreed to marry Romeo and Juliet expressly “to turn [their] households’ rancor to pure love” [II.iii.92], and we may assume the announcement would have happened sooner rather than later. Second, contrary to Mercutio’s outraged cry [III.i.72–3], there is nothing “dishonorable,” “vile,” or submissive about Romeo’s courtesy; nor does Tybalt “carr[y] it away”—more likely he is too bewildered to reply. Fortunately for the plot, Mercutio challenges Tybalt—though not in Romeo’s stead, for Mercutio is utterly deaf to his friend’s wishes. Nope, Mercutio is hot and bored and the chance to claim one of “ratcatcher” Tybalt’s “nine lives” [III.i.75–7] is as good as any excuse to draw swords.

Romeo tries desperately to intervene. Tybalt slays Mercutio and flees. Yet even at this critical juncture, hope remains. Romeo’s immediate response to Mercutio’s death is

closer to remorse than rage:

This gentleman, the prince's near ally,  
My very friend, hath got this mortal hurt  
In my behalf—my reputation stained  
With Tybalt's slander—Tybalt, that an hour  
Hath been my cousin. O sweet Juliet,  
Thy beauty hath made me effeminate  
And in my temper softened valor's steel!

[III.i.108–14]

Then, for reasons known only to himself (if that), Tybalt returns. Exactly how he enters is a crucial choice for directors and actors. Is he hurried onstage by lackeys, as though still trying to escape? Does he come back to challenge Romeo, to gloat, or simply to learn what happened? (He made his getaway before Mercutio died.) Whatever Tybalt's motive, Romeo interprets it in the worst possible light, snapping whatever restraint he might otherwise have clung to:

Alive in triumph, and Mercutio slain?  
Away to heaven respective lenity,  
And fire-eyed fury be my conduct now!  
Now, Tybalt, take the "villain" back again  
That late thou gavest me; for Mercutio's soul  
Is but a little way above our heads,  
Staying for thine to keep him company.  
Either thou or I, or both, must go with him.

[III.i.121–8]

Another swordfight ensues, equally rich with directorial possibilities. Does Romeo accidentally kill Tybalt (as Tybalt may accidentally have killed Mercutio), or does he slaughter him? Does he just barely escape with his own life? Regardless, once Tybalt falls Romeo can only stand, paralyzed, and shout useless words:

*Benvolio:* Romeo, away, be gone!  
The citizens are up, and Tybalt slain.  
Stand not amazed. The prince will doom thee death  
If thou art taken. Hence, be gone, away!  
*Romeo:* O, I am fortune's fool!

*Benvolio:*

Why dost thou stay?

[III.i.131–5]

Somehow he finds his way to Friar Laurence, where he learns the prince has chosen to banish rather than execute him. As we have seen, however, for Romeo the world and Juliet are one; thus to be banished from Juliet is “death mistermed. Calling death ‘banished,’ / Thou cut’st my head off with a golden ax / And smilest upon the stroke that murders me” [III.iii.20–23].

Unable to act—unable even to attempt suicide [III.iii.107–8]—Romeo leans on that old crutch, verbosity: “More honorable state, more courtship lives / In carrion flies than Romeo,” he rants. “They may seize / On the white wonder of dear Juliet’s hand / And steal immortal blessing from her lips, / Who, even in pure and vestal modesty, / Still blush, as thinking their own kisses sin” [III.iii.34–9]. When the nurse enters, having learned of the marriage from Juliet, her unintentionally lusty prodding lightens the mood. (“Stand up, stand up! Stand, an you be a man. / For Juliet’s sake, for her sake, rise and stand!” [III.iii.88–9].) The rhetorical centerpiece, however, is a rousing speech by Friar Laurence. I shall quote only pieces:

. . . By my holy order,  
 I thought thy disposition better tempered.  
 Hast thou slain Tybalt? Wilt thou slay thyself?  
 And slay thy lady that in thy life lives,  
 By doing damned hate upon thyself?  
 Why railst thou on thy birth, the heaven, and earth?  
 Since birth and heaven and earth, all three do meet  
 In thee at once, which thou at once wouldst lose.  
 Fie, fie, thou shamest thy shape, thy love, thy wit,  
 Which, like a usurer, abound’st in all,  
 And usest none in that true use indeed  
 Which should bedeck thy shape, thy love, thy wit.  
 . . . Thy Juliet is alive,  
 For whose dear sake thou wast but lately dead.  
 There art thou happy. Tybalt would kill thee,



But thou slewest Tybalt. There art thou happy too.  
 The law, that threatened death, becomes thy friend  
 And turns it to exile. There art thou happy.  
 A pack of blessings light upon thy back;  
 Happiness courts thee in her best array;  
 But, like a mishaved and sullen wench,  
 Thou pout'st upon thy fortune and thy love.  
 Take heed, take heed, for such die miserable. . . .

[III.iii.114–45]

The logic is impressive—Romeo pulls himself together and hurries off to consummate his marriage—but ultimately the well-meaning friar has been dropped into the wrong play. Romeo suggests as much in one of his outbursts: “Hang up philosophy!” he tells his would-be comforter. “Unless philosophy can make a Juliet, / Displant a town, reverse a prince’s doom, / It helps not, it prevails not” [III.iii.57–60]. Neither can it cheat death, outpace a plague, or wake a sleeping girl five minutes sooner—every plan reason devises, however ingenious in theory, crumbles beneath a cosmos that will not be displaced by two lovers.

Juliet has no spiritual advisor to reassure her, and her instinctive response to the news of death and banishment is as hyperbolic as Romeo’s—in fact, she uses his language of paradox to transform, again, her mother’s favorite image:

*Juliet:* O God! Did Romeo’s hand shed Tybalt’s blood?  
*Nurse:* It did, it did! alas the day, it did!  
*Juliet:* O serpent heart, hid with a flow’ring face!  
 Did ever dragon keep so fair a cave?  
 Beautiful tyrant! fiend angelical!  
 Dove-feathered raven! wolvis-ravens lamb!  
 Despised substance of divinest show!  
 Just opposite to what thou justly seem’st . . .  
 Was ever book containing such vile matter  
 So fairly bound?

[III.ii.71–84]

As she shall do for Romeo, the nurse helps Juliet regain her faith, though in this scene her



can find a time / To blaze your marriage, reconcile your friends, / Beg pardon of the prince, and call thee back / With twenty hundred thousand times more joy / Than thou went'st forth in lamentation" [III.iii.150–4]. Juliet shall need greater fortitude. Learning her father has agreed to marry her to Paris, Juliet hurries to the friar's cell, like Romeo before her, with talk of suicide. But whereas Romeo's wild despair is quickly soothed by the rational Laurence, Juliet is measured, resolute. He asks for help killing himself: "O, tell me, friar, tell me, / In what vile part of this anatomy / Doth my name lodge? Tell me, that I may sack / The hateful mansion" [III.iii.105–8]. She asks for help *or* she will kill herself: "Give me some present counsel; or, behold / 'Twixt my extremes and me this bloody knife / Shall play the umpire, arbitrating that / Which the commission of thy years and art / Could to no issue of true honor bring" [IV.i.61–5]. Laurence has no choice but to comply:

Hold, daughter. I do spy a kind of hope,  
Which craves as desperate an execution  
As that is desperate which we would prevent.  
If, rather than to marry County Paris,  
Thou hast the strength of will to slay thyself,  
Then it is likely thou wilt undertake  
A thing like death to chide away this shame,  
That cop'st with death himself to scape from it;  
And, if thou darest, I'll give thee remedy.

[IV.i.68–76]

Thus by the climactic final scene the lovers have shared the colloquial "death" of orgasm and, separately, contemplated the literal death of suicide. Romeo imagines his doom even before he meets Juliet:

. . . my mind misgives  
Some consequence, yet hanging in the stars,  
Shall bitterly begin his fearful date  
With this night's revels and expire the term  
Of a despised life, closed in my breast,

By some vile forfeit of untimely death.

[I.iv.106–11]

Juliet has a similar vision on the morrow of her husband's banishment:

O God, I have an ill-divining soul!  
Methinks I see thee, now thou art so low,  
As one dead in the bottom of a tomb.

[III.v.54–6]

The audience too is well prepared for death, for the play repeatedly mulls over how best to mourn a loved one. Friar Laurence reminds the Capulets of the “official” position as they stand, stunned, over what they believe to be Juliet's deathbed:

Heaven and yourself  
Had part in this fair maid—now heaven hath all,  
And all the better is it for the maid.  
Your part in her you could not keep from death,  
But heaven keeps his part in eternal life.  
The most you sought was her promotion,  
For 'twas your heaven she should be advanced;  
And weep ye now, seeing she is advanced  
Above the clouds, as high as heaven itself?  
O, in this love, you love your child so ill  
That you run mad, seeing that she is well.

[IV.v.66–76]

The friar is right to question this display of “love” for Juliet (and not only because he knows she is not dead but asleep). The lines that prompt his speech are among the most artificial Shakespeare ever wrote. As usual, the nurse howls loudest:

O woe! O woeful, woeful, woeful day!  
Most lamentable day, most woeful day  
That ever ever I did yet behold!  
O day, O day, O day! O hateful day!  
Never was seen so black a day as this.  
O woeful day! O woeful day!

[IV.v.49–54]

Yet the rants of the mother (“Accursed, unhappy, wretched, hateful day! / Most miserable hour that e'er time saw / In lasting labor of his pilgrimage!” [IV.v.43–5]) and father (“O

child, O child! my soul, and not my child! / Dead art thou—alack, my child is dead, / And with my child my joys are buried” [IV.v.62–4]), with their numbing repetitions and clichés, are nearly as bad. Is there any way to play this scene (if baffled directors do not cut it entirely) other than as a travesty of grief?

Less ridiculous, though equally false, is the ode that Paris delivers outside the Capulet monument:

Sweet flower, with flowers thy bridal bed I strew  
 (O woe! thy canopy is dust and stones)  
 Which with sweet water nightly I will dew;  
 Or, wanting that, with tears distilled by moans.  
 The obsequies that I for thee will keep  
 Nightly shall be to strew thy grave and weep.

[V.iii.12–17-]

Whatever passion he may have felt for his near-bride—a girl he never even had a chance to court—scarcely warrants such a vow; like Romeo did for Rosaline, Paris is acting the part of the forlorn lover. Other responses to death are more authentic—the vengefulness of Romeo on behalf of Mercutio, or of Capulet’s wife (“I beg for justice, which thou, prince, must give. / Romeo slew Tybalt; Romeo must not live” [III.i.179–80])—but we should no more applaud vengefulness than we should applaud, at play’s end, the subtle competition between Capulet and Montague to weigh their losses in gold:

*Capulet:* O brother Montague, give me thy hand.  
 This is my daughter’s jointure, for no more  
 Can I demand.

*Montague:* But I can give thee more;  
 For I will raise her statue in pure gold,  
 That whiles Verona by that name is known,  
 There shall no figure at such rate be set  
 As that of true and faithful Juliet.

*Capulet:* As rich shall Romeo’s by his lady’s lie—  
 Poor sacrifices of our enmity!

[V.iii.296–304]

Against this world of artifice and role playing—the distraught parents who only yesterday were prepared to disown their child [III.v.161–3 & 204–5]; the groom bereft of his arranged marriage; the youth honor-bound to avenge a dishonorable friend—Shakespeare juxtaposes the genuine grief of lost love. Romeo grieves first, and though he remains characteristically fond of poetic phrases, his swan song pulses with a hyper-alert sense of wonder:

O my love! my wife!  
 Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath,  
 Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty.  
 Thou are not conquered. Beauty's ensign yet  
 Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks,  
 And death's pale flag is not advanced there.

[V.iii.91–6]

Here he pauses to ask forgiveness of Tybalt, interred nearby—the sight (and smell) of that moldering corpse likely only strengthens Romeo's conviction: Even in death, Juliet exceeds all creatures in perfection as the sun exceeds other lights.

Ah, dear Juliet,  
 Why art thou yet so fair? Shall I believe  
 That unsubstantial Death is amorous,  
 And that the lean abhorred monster keeps  
 Thee here in dark to be his paramour?

[V.iii.101–5]

To keep her from the Reaper's withering gaze, Romeo vows to “stay with [her] / And never from this pallet of dim night / Depart again” [V.iii.106–8]. This fantasy of eternal beauty resembles Juliet's earlier wish that, when she dies,<sup>2</sup> the “loving, black-browed night” might “cut [Romeo] out in little stars, / And he will make the face of heaven so fine / That all the world will be in love with night” [III.ii.20–4]. At last, Romeo yearns to

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<sup>2</sup> It is possible her line at III.ii.21 reads “when he shall die” rather than “when I shall die”; regardless, the emphasis remains on Romeo's ultimate, star-bound immortality.

“shake the yoke of inauspicious stars / From this world-wearied flesh,” to “run on / The dashing rocks [his] seasick weary bark” [V.iii.111–12 & 117–18]; when he finally swallows the poison and proclaims, “Thus with a kiss I die” [V.iii.120], the grave seems merely the gateway to eternal union with Juliet. Their conjoined spirit will not be extinguished by mere death.

Of course, as everyone in the theatre knows, Juliet is not really dead. She wakes from her “borrowed likeness of shrunk death” [IV.i.104] not to her lord but to the trembling Friar Laurence. Yet after Romeo’s speechmaking, Shakespeare does not dwell on this last and cruelest twist of fate. After dismissing the friar with a single ominous line (“Go, get thee hence, for I will not away” [V.iii.160]), Juliet quickly determines—and executes—her final act:

*Juliet:* What’s here? A cup, closed in my true love’s hand?  
Poison, I see, hath been his timeless end.  
O churl! drunk all, and left no friendly drop  
To help me after? I will kiss thy lips.  
Haply some poison yet doth hang on them  
To make me die with a restorative.  
Thy lips are warm!

*Chief Watchman:* Lead, boy. Which way?

*Juliet:* Yea, noise? Then I’ll be brief. O happy dagger!  
This is thy sheath; there rust, and let me die.

[V.iii.161–71]

Her words lack Romeo’s romanticism, but it would be wrong to call them despairing or even particularly sad (except that he has left no poison for her). The facts are plain: Her life, with his, has ended, and there is no time for regrets or ruminations. She leaves such tasks to us, refusing even to reveal whether she still believes all those grand lines she once spoke about love after death. For most of the play she has voiced her feelings freely, majestically, yet in her final moments she confides in no one. It is part of

the play's tragedy that such a voice should be silenced so soon.

Why did Romeo and Juliet die? Forget that any number of chance events, none inevitable, contributed to their deaths; forget too the numerous social structures that let them down, from cold families to a bungling clergy to the ineffectual law embodied in a detached prince. However much of Verona was unworthy, did the world really have nothing left to offer once it deprived them of each other? With this question let us turn to the two supporting characters who were most in position to influence fate (for good or ill), and who consequently are most guilty of failing the lovers. And we begin with Romeo's friend and professed defender of his honor,

### **Mercutio**

We are told that Mercutio is "kinsman" to the prince of Verona [III.i.144] (though Mercutio himself never bothers to mention it); consequently he belongs to neither faction—indeed, urging a peaceable end to the feud would seem to be in his own family's best interest. The reality is quite different, of course—Mercutio spends so much of the play joking with Romeo and Benvolio and insulting Tybalt, we might easily mistake him for a full-blooded Montague. Yet Mercutio's grudge against Tybalt has far more to do with his style than his surname (which in fact is not even Capulet: Tybalt is the child of Capulet's brother-in-law [III.i.145]). "Why, what is Tybalt?" asks Benvolio, and Mercutio is off to the races:

More than Prince of Cats, I can tell you. O, he's the courageous captain of compliments. He fights as you sing prick song—keeps time, distance, and proportion; he rests his minim rests, one, two, and the third in your bosom! . . . The pox of such antic, lipping, affecting phantasims—these new tuners of accent! "By Jesu, a very good blade! a very tall man! a very good whore!" Why, is not this a lamentable thing, grandsire, that we should be thus afflicted with these strange flies, these fashionmongers, these pardon-me's, who



stand so much on the new form that they cannot sit at ease on the old bench? O, their bones, their bones!

[II.iv.18–35]

In essence, Mercutio's problem with Tybalt is that he's shallow, a slave to fashion. (We may also hear the contempt of the aristocracy for the rising merchant class, "affecting" the fashions of their social betters.) You won't hear me defending Tybalt, but may we not level similar charges at Mercutio? His default mode of combat is as ornamented as any fencing style, a flashy duel of wits rather than rapiers:

*Mercutio:* Signor Romeo, *bonjour!* There's a French salutation to your French slop. You gave us the counterfeit fairly last night.

*Romeo:* Good morrow to you both. What counterfeit did I give you?

*Mercutio:* The slip, sir, the slip. Can you not conceive?

*Romeo:* Pardon, good Mercutio. My business was great, and in such a case as mine a man may strain courtesy.

*Mercutio:* That's as much as to say, such a case as yours constrains a man to bow in the hams.

*Romeo:* Meaning, to curtsy.

*Mercutio:* Thou hast most kindly hit it.

*Romeo:* A most courteous exposition.

*Mercutio:* Nay, I am the very pink of courtesy.

*Romeo:* Pink for flower.

*Mercutio:* Right.

*Romeo:* Why, then is my pump well-flowered.

*Mercutio:* Sure wit, follow me this jest now till thou hast worn out thy pump, that, when the single sole of it is worn, the jest may remain, after the wearing, solely singular.

*Romeo:* O single-soled jest, solely singular for the singleness!

*Mercutio:* Come between us, good Benvolio! My wits faint.

[II.iv.43–67]

Mercutio feigns irritation, but really this is the Romeo he wants: a perfect excuse for sporting away the day. "Now art thou sociable, now art thou Romeo; now art thou what thou art, by art as well as by nature," he exclaims [II.iv.88–9], relieved that his friend has put off "groaning for love" [II.iv.87–8], at least for the moment. The implication is that such artful (and artificial) jesting is a young man's natural profession.

Lovers are intolerably dull, though Mercutio can speak only of Romeo's unrequited infatuation with Rosaline; he never learns that another, truer love has emerged.

All right—suppose Romeo were to introduce Mercutio to Juliet on the spot. Would Mercutio's reply be essentially different—however much more obscene—than Friar Laurence's: "Holy Saint Francis! What a change is here! / Is Rosaline, that thou didst love so dear, / So soon forsaken? Young men's love then lies / Not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes" [II.iii.65–8]? Mercutio would revise this only slightly—love lies not in the eyes but farther down. His vision of "driveling love" is grossly reductive: Cupid is "like a great natural that runs lolling up and down to hide his bauble in a hole" [II.iv.90–1]. Lest anyone miss his meaning, he is more pointed as he searches for Romeo in the waning moments of Capulet's ball—the high poetry of the balcony scene is only lines removed from an extraordinary torrent of filth that would defile everything lovers hold sacred:

*Benvolio:* An if [Romeo] hear thee, thou wilt anger him.

*Mercutio:* This cannot anger him. 'Twould anger him  
 To raise a spirit in his mistress' circle  
 Of some strange nature, letting it there stand  
 Till she had laid it and conjured it down.  
 That were some spite; my invocation  
 Is fair and honest: in his mistress' name,  
 I conjure only but to raise him up.

*Benvolio:* Come, he hath hid himself among these trees  
 To be consorted with the humorous night.  
 Blind is his love and best befits the dark.

*Mercutio:* If love be blind, love cannot hit the mark.  
 Now will he sit under a medlar tree  
 And wish his mistress were that kind of fruit  
 As maids call medlars when they laugh alone.  
 O, Romeo, that she were, O that she were  
 An open-arse and thou a popp'ring pear!

[II.i.22–38]

For Mercutio, where women are concerned a man aims to hit one mark only: “By her fine foot, straight leg, and quivering thigh, / And the demesnes that there adjacent lie”

[II.i.19–20].

What could prompt this scorching cynicism? How fascinating to speculate! Might we go so far as to suggest that Mercutio’s “incessant bawdiness is the mask for what may be a repressed homoeroticism” [Bloom, 97]? That seems to me a distraction, though were I to play Mercutio I might suppose he had been burned by a past love affair. (Perhaps literally—like all Shakespearean clowns he has a weakness for puns on venereal disease.) More interesting to me is an observation Mercutio makes at the tail end of his giddy “Queen Mab” speech, a forty-two-line rhapsody that would quite possibly go on forever were it not for Romeo’s sudden interruption: “Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace! / Thou talk’st of nothing” [I.iv.95–6]. Mercutio’s reply is one of those moments of apparent, uncontextualized wisdom so common in Shakespeare:<sup>3</sup> “True, I talk of dreams; / Which are the children of an idle brain, / Begot of nothing but vain fantasy; / Which is as thin of substance as the air, / And more inconstant than the wind . . .” [I.iv.96–100]. Now Shakespeare is very often wise. But is Mercutio?

In the first few scenes of *Romeo and Juliet* we see idleness beget lovesickness in the hero and mindless brawling between two otherwise respectable houses. In Mercutio, idleness breeds something more sinister: the despair, masquerading as carelessness (“Give me a case to put my visage in. / A visor for a visor!” [I.iv.29–30]), of a young man who is too smart and capable to be wasting his life yet is wasting it nonetheless. Even were he not the most charismatic wit in the play, his position as kinsman to the

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<sup>3</sup> Like Polonius’s “Neither a borrower nor a lender be” and Portia’s “The quality of mercy is not strained,” Mercutio’s speeches should be served with heaping irony.

prince would grant him license to do nearly anything he chooses, and what he chooses is to roam the streets picking fights:

Thou! why, thou wilt quarrel with a man that hath a hair more or a hair less in his beard than thou hast. Thou wilt quarrel with a man for cracking nuts, having no other reason but because thou hast hazel eyes. What eye but such an eye would spy out such a quarrel? Thy head is as full of quarrels as an egg is full of meat; and yet thy head hath been beaten as addle as an egg for quarreling. Thou hast quarreled with a man for coughing in the street, because he hath wakened thy dog that hath lain asleep in the sun. Didst thou not fall out with a tailor for wearing his new doublet before Easter? with another for tying his new shoes with old ribbon?

[III.i.16–28]

Ostensibly, this is Mercutio’s description of Benvolio—whose very name suggests “benevolent,” whose first instinct is to “keep the peace” [I.i.66], and who disappears from the play after Tybalt’s death renders peace impossible. Is there any doubt he is really describing himself? No sooner does Mercutio shut his mouth than he reopens it to quarrel with Tybalt for unintentionally punning on the word “consort.” (“What, dost thou make us minstrels? An thou make minstrels of us, look to hear nothing but discords” [III.i.45–7].) And when his quarrelling at last leads to death, he responds with the outraged agony of one who suddenly understands he has deserved no better end:

*Mercutio:* A plague a both your houses! Zounds, a dog, a rat, a mouse, a cat, to scratch a man to death! a braggart, a rogue, a villain, that fights by the book of arithmetic! Why the devil came you between us? I was hurt under your arm.

*Romeo:* I thought all for the best.

*Mercutio:* Help me into some house, Benvolio,  
Or I shall faint. A plague a both your houses!  
They have made worms’ meat of me. I have it,  
And soundly too. Your houses!

[III.i.98–107]

The most dazzling moment in any production of *Romeo and Juliet* I have seen

comes midway through Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 film, as John McEnery's brilliant Mercutio staggers through the streets of Verona, clutching his death wound and cursing the villain who has killed him, only to look up and realize his friends are laughing, cheering, *because they think he's joking!* In McEnery's face is pure anguish—not that he is dying, but that even in death he is no more than a clown. I was fourteen, and that moment was when I first understood Shakespeare's plays consist not of archaic words and syntaxes (and, teachers insisted, profundities) but of flesh-and-blood people, in all their complexity. If Romeo and Juliet teach us of the necessity of love, so does Mercutio, for he dies one of the loneliest deaths in Shakespeare.

My compassion for Mercutio notwithstanding, there is no denying the damage he causes. He has ignorance for an excuse, but what ultimately dooms him (and through him Romeo and Juliet) is not ignorance of any particular love affair but of love itself. It is an ignorance that infects Verona and poisons its ethereal lovers as surely as any mortal drug, for in nearly every scene from which they are absent we witness love reduced to something less than it is: for Capulet, a gift to "give . . . to my friend" [III.v.193]; for Capulet's wife and for Paris, an occasion to compose sentimental verses; for the nurse, a chance to play matchmaker and live vicariously through unspoiled youth.

For Mercutio, however, love is more insidious. It is a threat to fraternity. To return to Queen Mab: Initially Mercutio associates love with a charming, mischievous pixie, "the fairies' midwife,"

[who] comes  
 In shape no bigger than an agate stone  
 On the forefinger of an alderman,  
 Drawn with a team of little atomi  
 Over men's noses as they lie asleep;  
 Her wagon spokes made of long spinners' legs,

The cover, of the wings of grasshoppers;  
 Her traces, of the smallest spiderweb;  
 Her collars, of the moonshine's wat'ry beams;  
 Her whip, of cricket's bone; the lash, of film;  
 Her wagoner, a small gray-coated gnat,  
 Not half so big as a round little worm  
 Pricked from the lazy finger of a maid;  
 Her chariot is an empty hazelnut,  
 Made by the joiner squirrel or old grub,  
 Time out o' mind the fairies' coachmakers.  
 And in this state she gallops night by night  
 Through lovers' brains, and then they dream of love . . .

[I.iv.54–71]

Lovers, as he tells it, are no different from courtiers who dream of curtsies or lawyers fees—and dreams, recall, are “begot of nothing but vain fantasy.” But danger lies just beyond these fantasies, which turn increasingly sexual, even misogynistic. Mab “plagues” ladies with blistered lips “[b]ecause their breaths with sweetmeats tainted are” [I.iv.75–6]; she “bakes the elflocks in foul sluttish hairs, / Which once untangled much misfortune bodes” [I.iv.90–1]. All of a sudden the fairy has metamorphosed into “the hag, when maids lie on their backs, / That presses them and learns them first to bear, / Making them women of good carriage” [I.iv.92–4]. She is no longer a midwife; she is more like a succubus.

We have seen how Mercutio resents Romeo the lover. He is tiresome, emasculated—“Without his roe, like a dried herring” [II.iv.37]—and ripe for parody (though the Queen Mab speech turns too vicious for parody). Indeed, the Romeo who weeps for the unfeeling Rosaline deserves all he gets. But nothing Mercutio says—and as far as we can infer, nothing he imagines—admits the validity or even existence of such love as Romeo and Juliet feel for each other, though it is the only true love in the play. Nothing else could make such poetry.

Harold Goddard, ever insightful, says this of Mercutio's nighttime vision: "The lines on Queen Mab are indeed delightful. But imagination in any proper sense they are not. They are sheer fancy. . . . [The Queen Mab speech] shines, and even seems profound, beside the utterances of the Capulets and the Nurse. But it fades, and grows superficial, beside Juliet's and Romeo's. It is one more shade of what passes for poetry but is not" [123–4]. Goddard identifies poetry with imagination and contrasts both with "sheer fancy" (or fantasy), but he only hints at his full meaning. If I may venture a guess: The difference between imagination and fantasy—in short, between Romeo and Juliet and every other character with whom they share a stage but not a world—is the difference between true and false. Imagination, poetry—these enhance truth; fantasy distorts or rejects truth entirely. Out of "sheer fancy," Mercutio paints a vivid, witty, even terrifying picture, but his brain is idle, his ideas "begot of nothing," and so he fails to truly represent life. Not because in "real life" fairies don't exist but because he reduces something profound—the experience of love and what dreams may come of love—into something trivial. It is in this respect—this *lack* of respect—that he most fails Romeo.

### **The Nurse**

Of Juliet's nurse I have less to say, partly because I have already touched on her character elsewhere in this essay, partly because I do not find her as interesting as Mercutio, but also because her moment of crisis—her failure of Juliet—is so much more evident. It happens soon after Romeo has been banished for slaying Tybalt ("the best friend I had," the nurse wails [III.ii.61]—surely grief has robbed her of her senses) and Capulet has threatened his daughter with her own form of banishment—"I'll ne'er acknowledge thee, / Nor what is mine shall never do thee good" [III.v.195–6]—if she

refuses to marry Paris. Deprived of nearly everyone she has ever relied on, Juliet turns in desperation to her oldest friend and confidante, the loyal servant who for three acts now has nurtured and kept her most precious secret:

*Juliet:* O God!—O nurse, how shall this be prevented?  
 My husband is on earth, my faith in heaven.  
 How shall that faith return again to earth  
 Unless that husband send it me from heaven  
 By leaving earth? Comfort me, counsel me.  
 Alack, alack, that heaven should practice stratagems  
 Upon so soft a subject as myself!  
 What say'st thou? Hast thou not a word of joy?  
 Some comfort, nurse.

*Nurse:* Faith, here it is.  
 Romeo is banished; and all the world to nothing  
 That he dares ne'er come back to challenge you;  
 Or if he do, it needs must be by stealth.  
 Then, since the case so stands as now it doth,  
 I think it best you married with the county.

[III.v.206–19]

Just like Mercutio, the nurse is guilty of a failure to imagine—in her case, that Romeo might rate Juliet higher than the world, or that Juliet might happily be challenged “by stealth,” so long as the challenger is Romeo. Indeed, so impoverished is her imagination, the nurse begins to praise Paris as she once praised Romeo, as though they were interchangeable (as grooms are when expedience, and not the heart, governs marriage):

O, he's a lovely gentleman!  
 Romeo's a dishclout to him. An eagle, madam,  
 Hath not so green, so quick, so fair an eye  
 As Paris hath. Beshrew my very heart,  
 I think you are happy in this second match,  
 For it excels your first; or if it did not,  
 Your first is dead—or 'twere as good he were  
 As living here and you no use of him.

[III.v.220–7]

That's it in a nutshell, those last two lines: What is useful trumps what is truly good.



Usefulness is easily appreciated; poetry is fine for a moonlit night but no shield against the threat of disinheritance.

It is easier to brave disinheritance when one would rather die than submit. Juliet dismisses the nurse and, as righteous as any martyr, damns her:

Ancient damnation! O most wicked fiend!  
Is it more sin to wish me thus forsworn,  
Or to dispraise my lord with that same tongue  
Which she hath praised him with above compare  
So many thousand times? Go, counselor!  
Thou and my bosom henceforth shall be twain.

[III.v.237–42]

Such indignation is expected, given the circumstances. But is it entirely just? Goddard thinks so:

[Juliet] could not have chosen a more accurate term, for the Nurse is playing at the moment precisely the part of the devil in a morality play. . . . Those who dismiss the Nurse as just a coarse old woman whose loquacity makes us laugh fail hopelessly to plumb the depth of her depravity. It was the Nurse's desertion of her that drove Juliet to Friar Laurence and the desperate expedient of the sleeping potion. Her cowardice was a link in the chain that led to Juliet's death. [120]

That the nurse deserted Juliet in her hour of need is certain. That her actions stem from cowardice is equally so. But should we leap with Goddard (and Juliet) from these too-human sins to fiendish depravity? The nurse is—yes—a coarse old woman who would rather live out her days dandling babies than risk peace of mind (and more) to stand with the weaker party. Yet even this is not wholly fair, for before she offers Juliet that fateful, “fiendish” advice, she does something else for which she deserves credit. The moment occurs only fifty lines earlier, as Capulet rants and raves that his daughter—“young baggage! disobedient wretch!” [III.v.161]—dares protest the marriage he has arranged for her:

*Capulet:*                   Wife, we scarce thought us blest  
                                   That God had lent us but this only child;  
                                   But now I see this one is one too much,  
                                   And that we have a curse in having her.  
                                   Out on her, hilding!

*Nurse:*                    God in heaven bless her!  
                                   You are to blame, my lord, to rate her so.

[III.v.165–70]

A small victory in light of what follows, yet it proves the nurse’s instinct is to protect Juliet, just as Mercutio feels responsibility to defend Romeo. Neither produces the desired result—we have seen what happens to Mercutio, and the nurse succeeds only in further enraging Capulet—but the effort is moving while it lasts. At least the nurse is more maternal than Capulet’s wife, who throws up her hands and exits: “Talk not to me, for I’ll not speak a word. / Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee” [III.v.204–5]. Indeed, when first we meet the nurse she makes a point to compare Juliet to her own deceased daughter, Susan: “Susan and she (God rest all Christian souls!) / Were of an age. Well, Susan is with God; / She was too good for me” [I.iii.18–20].

There is the story of Verona: Love appeared in the figures of a young boy and girl, and the city proved unworthy of the blessing. It is home neither to demi-devils nor monsters of the deep but to ordinary people who cannot apprehend the extraordinary until it has passed beyond their grasp. Perhaps not even then—the prince’s closing speech is appropriate precisely because it is inadequate:

A glooming peace this morning with it brings.  
                                   The sun for sorrow will not show his head.  
                                   Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things;  
                                   Some shall be pardoned, and some punished;  
                                   For never was a story of more woe  
                                   Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.

[V.iii.305–10]

The woe does not belong to the lovers—they lived more in one night than their kinsmen

shall live in a lifetime, and they shall live on long after the golden statues erected in their memory have crumbled to dust.

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