'DEATH-MARKED LOVE': DESIRE AND PRESENCE IN *ROMEO AND JULIET*

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I

The action of *Romeo and Juliet* occurs between two speeches proclaiming the lovers' deaths – the prologue's forecast of events and the prince's closing summary. The vicissitudes of desire take place in this unusual period, after life yet before death. It is a kind of liminal phase in which social and personal pressures build to intense pitch before they are settled. Such liminal tension, as Victor Turner suggests, is the very stuff of which social dramas are made.[1] It figures a mounting crisis that envelops those observing and taking part in the unfolding action. At the same time, this temporal setting has a range of interpretive implications.

With the lovers' deaths announced from the start, audience attention is directed to the events' fateful course. The question is less what happens than how it happens. By framing the action in this way, the prologue triggers various generic and narrative effects. First, it establishes the play as 'a tragedy of fate' similar to Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, which gives 'the audience a superior knowledge of the story from the outset, reducing the hero's role to bring into prominence the complex patterns of action'.[2] In turn, this generic marker initiates a compelling narrative, poised between prolepsis and analepsis, as opening portents of death are played off against background details and further intimations in the following scenes.[3] The tension between these hints and flashbacks fills the narrative with foreboding. The breakneck speed

of events (in contrast to the extended time frame of Arthur Brooke's version, a few days as opposed to nine months)[4] sees the ordained end bear relentlessly on the lovers. They are caught between a determining past and future.

The narrative has a further generic analogue. Gayle Whittier suggests that the play develops through a contrast between sonnet lyricism and tragedy that is finally reconciled in death: 'the "spoken lines" of the Prologue predestine the plot of the play to be tragic from without, even as the spirit of Petrarchan poetry spoken by Romeo to Juliet finally necessitates their tragic deaths from within'.[5] What first appears as thematic conflict between two of the period's key literary modes makes way for a troubling similarity. The spirit of Petrarchism is revealed as tragically fatal and idealized romance collapses.

In this view, *Romeo and Juliet* stages the outcome of unfulfillable desire. Although it appears to reverse the erotic story told in the Sonnets, the dramatic narrative ends up

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[1] *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, 1974), pp. 40–1 and *passim*.
[2] Brian Gibbons, Introduction, in *Romeo and Juliet* (London, 1980), p. 37.
[3] On analepsis and prolepsis, see Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London, 1983), pp. 46ff.
[4] Gibbons, Introduction, p. 54.
[5] Gayle Whittier, 'The Sonnet's Body and the Body Sonnetized in *Romeo and Juliet*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 40 (1989), 27–41; p. 40.

paralleling the failing course of identity and desire which can be traced through those poems. There the poet reluctantly finds his desire shifting from the self-gratifying potential figured by the youth to the disarming dark lady, who offers instead 'a desire that her very presence at the same time will frustrate'.[6] This pattern initially seems to be inverted in the play – Romeo willingly renounces self-centred longing for Rosaline, Juliet tests and proves her self-reliance, both find true love in each other. However, their love ends in reciprocal death, with the Petrarchan images fatally embodied and materialized. The links between love and death unveil a dark scepticism about desire, despite bursts of romantic idealism. They convey a sense of futility and ironic fate which Romeo momentarily feels but is able to forget for a time, 'my mind misgives / Some consequence yet hanging in the stars / Shall bitterly begin his fearful date / With this night's revels' (1.4.106–9).

Such scepticism appears in many subsequent literary and psychoanalytic conceptions, where possibilities of romantic union are queried.[7] These questions carry implications about selfhood and desire and about ways of representing them. In theories and stories of divorce or isolation, selfhood is not effaced but conceived as incomplete; as Barbara Freedman puts it, 'The denial of self-presence doesn't negate presence but redefines it as a distancing or spacing we always seek but fail to close'.[8] Characters cannot attain their goals, and the inability to claim satisfaction affects desire as much as selfhood. Proceeding from an uncertain source, desire remains 'predicated on lack, and even its apparent fulfilment is also a moment of loss'.[9] In this view, desire and presence are forever intertwined: 'Differantiated [sic] presence, which is always and inevitably differed and deferred, and which in consequence exceeds the alternatives of presence and absence, is the condition of desire'.[10] They forestall each other's wholeness yet continue to provide the self with images of consummation, contentment and victory – the

curtsies, kisses, suits, livings and battles which Mercutio's dreamers envisage but cannot clasp, 'Begot of nothing but vain fantasy, / Which is as thin of substance as the air, / And more inconstant than the wind' (1.4.98–100).

The recurrence of this viewpoint in fiction and theory suggests that *Romeo and Juliet* stages a paradigmatic conflict between ways of representing and interpreting desire. The play affects these possibilities by placing idealized and tragic conceptions of desire and selfhood in intense dialogue with each other. This dialogue continues to be played out in literary and theoretical texts since, as Alan Sinfield notes, notions of sexuality and gender are 'major sites of ideological production upon which meanings of very diverse kinds are established and contested'.[11] *Romeo and Juliet* informs and illustrates a cultural history of desire in which images of romantic fulfilment or failure carry great importance.

As well as being part of this history, Shakespeare's play has two other distinctive temporal

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6 Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley, 1986), p. 24.

7 Two of the primary psychoanalytic texts are *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. A clear reading of this direction in Freud is offered by Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore, 1976): 'the death drive is the very soul, the constitutive principle of libidinal circulation' (p. 124). Related scepticism underlies Lacan's view of the link between desire and demand. Desire is dependent on demand, but demand, 'by being articulated in signifiers, leaves a metonymic remainder that runs under it . . . an element that is called desire': desire leads only to desire. See *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1981), p. 154; compare Catherine Belsey's gloss of Lacan's view – 'desire subsists in what eludes both vision and representation, in what exceeds demand, including the demand for love' – in *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford, 1994), p. 139.

8 *Staging the Gaze: Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis, and Shakespearean Comedy* (Ithaca, 1991), p. 110.

9 Belsey, *Desire*, pp. 38–9.

10 Ibid., p. 70.

11 *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford, 1992), p. 128.

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features. First, as noted above, it unfolds over a charged time span. Time allows desire to be acted out but also threatens its fulfilment, by either running out or not stopping. This equivocal link affects desire's tragic course in *Romeo and Juliet*, 'as the time and place / Doth make against' the characters (5.3.223–4).

Secondly, its depiction of desire reverberates with erotic tropes from earlier traditions – Platonic, Ovidian, Petrarchan, as well as popular sayings. These tropes are used by the characters to talk and think about relationships, but they are also challenged for not allowing the gap between self and other to be bridged. They are unfulfilling since it feels as if they belong to someone else; as Astrophil puts it, 'others' feet still seemed but strangers in my way'.[12] The lovers are often dissatisfied with or unsure about the words of others. Their discontent grows from early dismissals such as Romeo's 'Yet tell me not, for I have heard it all' (1.1.171) and 'Thou talk'st of nothing' (1.4.96), or Juliet's 'And stint thou, too, I pray thee, Nurse' (1.3.60), to deeper disquiet over the inability of this language to match their experience: 'Thou canst not speak of that thou dost not feel' (3.3.64); 'Some say the lark makes sweet division; / This doth not so, for she divideth us' (3.5.29–30). The corollary of their frustration with the language of others and of the past is the value they put on their own: 'She speaks. / O, speak again, bright angel' (2.1.67–8); 'every tongue that speaks / But Romeo's name speaks heavenly eloquence' (3.2.32–3).

Like the lovers, the play also seeks to revise existing rhetorical conventions. It reworks these tropes into personal, tragic terms which underlie later literary and psychological conceptions. Hence, in addition to exemplifying Stephen Greenblatt's point that 'psychoanalysis is the historical outcome of certain characteristic Renaissance strategies',[13] *Romeo and Juliet* shows that these strategies develop in response to earlier discourses. The play's pivotal role in later depictions of desire stems from the way it juxtaposes historical and emergent conceptions.

These complex temporal and rhetorical effects are hinted at in the Prologue, which repeatedly sets past, present and future against each other. 'Our scene' is initially laid in a kind of continuous present, yet one that remains hanging between 'ancient grudge' and 'new mutiny'. Likewise, the 'star-crossed lovers take their life' in a present whose intimations of living and loving are circumscribed by 'the fatal loins' of 'their parents' strife'. As the birth-suicide pun on 'take their life' hints, sexuality is already marked by violence and death, its future determined by the past's impact on the present. The Prologue ends by anchoring the staging of 'death-marked love' in the here and now of the audience, who attend 'the two-hours' traffic of our stage'. It anticipates a successful theatrical conclusion, with the play's performance 'striv[ing] to mend' what the lovers 'shall miss' – a kind of closure that their desire cannot realize. In contrast to the simple linear Chorus to Act 2, which culminates in the lovers' union, the rebounding moments of the Prologue displace consummation with death.[14]

A complicity between sex and death is well known in Renaissance texts. Its function in *Romeo and Juliet* is, however, distinguished by temporal shifts which define the characters' relations. While the lovers in a poem such as Donne's 'The Canonization' exceed worldly time and place, and their post-coital condition is eternally celebrated, in Shakespeare's play the links between past and present, social and personal, cannot be transcended. The intense

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[12] *Sir Philip Sidney: Selected Poems*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford, 1973), p. 117. As discussed below, this first sonnet's turn to a seemingly authentic self is also made in *Romeo and Juliet*.

[13] Stephen Greenblatt, 'Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture', in *Literary Theory / Renaissance Texts*, ed. Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore, 1986), 210–24; p. 224.

[14] 'But passion lends them power, time means, to meet, / Tempering extremities with extreme sweet' (2 Chor. 13–14). The Chorus, not included in first Quarto, is reprinted in the Arden edition (see n. 2).

oneness felt by the lovers appears to signify mutual presence, but such intersubjective moments are overlaid with social and historical pressures. The drama alternates between instants of passion, when time seems to stand still, and inevitable returns to the ongoing rush of events. This contrast is manifested not only in the characterization and plot but in the interplay of underlying traditions, sources and tropes. The play reiterates and revises these conventions, confirming a conception of desire that speeds not to its goal but its end. In this conception personal presence can exist only as a transient, illusory sign of desire.

II

One of the main influences *Romeo and Juliet* has had on later depictions of love lies in its celebration of personal desire. The force of this celebration comes partly from its dramatic mode, staging the lovers' experiences for a 'live' audience. In the decades after the play was first performed, poetry (till then, the key romantic discourse) was changing from oral to written modes. Until the rise of the novel, drama remained the pre-eminent form for presenting love stories, and stage performance could give these tales the confessional tones which earlier forms of poetic recitation doubtless achieved. The Prologue enacts this shift by relocating the love sonnet in the drama, a move again underlined by the verse which the lovers will soon share in Act 1, scene 5.

On stage, the impact of the 'personal' can come across in different ways – through physical, verbal, even interpersonal performance. In *Romeo and Juliet* these forms of presence concentrate in the protagonists' unshakeable love. It seems to assume an essential quality which captures the 'diachronic unity of the subject'.[15] This unity underwrites numerous adaptations of and responses to the play, from elaborate stage productions, operas and ballets, to more popular versions such as the American musical *West-Side Story* or the Australian narrative verse of C. J.

Dennis's *A Sentimental Bloke*, whose colloquial tones add to the impression of true romance. For many audience groups, each of these transformations once again discovers the play's 'spirit', which surpasses local differences to reveal truths about desire and 'ourselves'.

The director's programme notes to a recently well-received production in Australia illustrate this kind of response. The mixed tones of confession and authority sway the audience to accept his views:

My fascination with this play continues. Considerable research over the years has taken me twice to Verona and Mantua, but the conflict in Bosnia has brought the work urgently closer. I first considered a Muslim-Christian setting several months before the tragedy of Bosko and Admira ... A study of the text supplies no religious, class, nor race barriers between the 'two households' and this makes Shakespeare's vision all the more powerful. When differences are minimal, ancient grudges seem the more difficult to understand. Yet they remain with us today, passed on by our parents. It seems the one thing we teach the next generation is how to maintain rage and other forms of prejudices. Thus this work is as much about young people in the Brisbane Mall today as it is about the hot days in medieval Verona ... The human spirit, as portrayed by the 31 year old playwright, is a thing of wonder to be nurtured and treasured.[16]

The paradoxical effects of citing 'real' personal and political situations are first to detach the drama from its own historical concerns and then to efface the ideological grounds of the current crisis. The revelation of 'human spirit' triumphs over any tragic significance. Indeed, the play's freedom from material contexts testifies to its, its author's, and our affirming 'vision'. This viewpoint recalls Coleridge's claim that Shakespeare is 'out of time', his characters 'at once

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[15] Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London, 1985), p. 34.

[16] Aubrey Mellor, 'From the Artistic Director', in Queensland Theatre Company Program for *Romeo and Juliet* (Brisbane, 1993), p. 3.

true to nature, and fragments of the divine mind that drew them'.[17]

Because it hides sexual, class and ethnic factors behind archetypal human experience, this sort of perception of Shakespeare's work becomes a target of materialist criticism:

Idealised and romanticised out of all dialectical relationship with society, it [Shakespeare's work] takes on the seductive glamour of aestheticism, the sinister and self-destructive beauty of decadent romance ... this 'Shakespeare myth' functions in contemporary culture as an ideological framework for containing consensus and for sustaining myths of unity, integration and harmony in the cultural superstructures of a divided and fractured society.[18]

In relation to sexual issues, universal images of the personal in *Romeo and Juliet* can be seen as helping to naturalize notions of desire which reinforce an 'ideology of romantic love' in terms of 'heterosexualizing idealization' and the 'canonization of heterosexuality'.[19] Personal romance and desire are revealed as authoritative codes which conceal and impose official sexuality.

The kinds of ideological impacts that the 'personal' registers may be intensified *or* interrogated by the generic effects of 'Excellent conceited Tragedie', as the Quarto titles announce. The combination of personal experience and tragic consequence can turn *Romeo and Juliet* into an account of contradictory notions of desire and identity, in line with Jonathan Dollimore's recognition that, notwithstanding traditions of celebration 'in terms of man's defeated potential', tragedy questions ideological norms.[20] The genre's ambiguous drift to 'radical' or cathartic ends sees the play assume a kind of meta-textual disinterestedness, distanced from final interpretations as it seems to reflect on how desire may be conceived and staged. This distance can be observed in the play's citing and reworking of tropes and conventions from existing discourses of love and romance. The intertextual traces reveal continuities and changes in the depiction of desire,

keyed to social and historical notions of the personal and interpersonal.

Platonism is traditionally seen as offering a set of tropes that affirm selfhood and desire as forms of true being despite possibilities of loss.[21] In the *Symposium*, for instance, Socrates defines love as desire for what one lacks, either a specific quality or a lost or missing element of the self. Aristophanes goes so far as to image love as a 'longing for and following after [a] primeval wholeness ... the healing of our dissevered nature'. The *Symposium* deals with this incipiently tragic situation by redirecting desire to the heavens; in a comedic resolution, love's lack is fulfilled by catching sight of 'the very soul of beauty ... beauty's very self'.[22] Such vision provides the model for Renaissance Petrarchism.

This model is famously reproduced in Pietro Bembo's Neoplatonic paean to divine love at the close of Castiglione's *The Courtier*. He recounts 'a most happie end for our desires', as the courtier forsakes sensual desire for a wiser

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[17] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures on Shakespeare and Other Poets and Dramatists*, Everyman's Library (London: Dent, 1914), p. 410.

[18] Graham Holderness, Preface: 'All this', in *The Shakespeare Myth*, ed. Graham Holderness (Manchester, 1988), pp. xii–xiii.

[19] See Dympna Callaghan, 'The Ideology of Romantic Love: The Case of *Romeo and Juliet*', in Dympna Callaghan, Lorraine Helms and Jyotsna Singh, *The Weyward Sisters: Shakespeare and Feminist Politics* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 59–101; Jonathan Goldberg, '*Romeo and Juliet*'s Open Rs', in *Queering the Renaissance*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham, 1994), 218–35; p. 227; and Joseph A. Porter, 'Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the Canonization of Heterosexuality', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 88 (1989), 127–47.

[20] *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Age of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Chicago, 1984), p. 49.

[21] Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1990), p. 5 and *passim*.

[22] *Symposium*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, 1985), 193a–c, 211d–e.

love that guides the soul: 'through the particular beautie of one bodie hee guideth her to the universall beautie of all bodies ... Thus the soule kindled in the most holy fire of true heavenly love, fleeth to couple her self with the nature of Angels'. This 'most holy love' is 'derived of the unitie of the heavenly beautie, goodnesse and wisedom', and in narrating its course Bembo himself undergoes an ecstatic loss of identity. He speaks as if 'ravished and beside himselfe', and emphasizes that 'I have spoken what the holy furie of love hath (unsought for) indited to me'.[23] Speaking and experiencing true desire are related forms of self-transcendence, and Bembo can rejoice in the loss of selfhood.

Similar experience underpins the double structure of Edmund Spenser's *Fowre Hymnes*, first published in 1596, around the time *Romeo and Juliet* was written. The hymn in honour of earthly love characterizes the lover as Tantalus, feeding 'his hungrie fantasy, / Still full, yet neuer satisfyde ... For nought may quench his infinite desyre'. This figure is recast in the corresponding hymn of heavenly love, where the poet renounces his earlier poems – 'lewd layes' which showed love as a 'mad fit' – for a lover linked to 'high eternall powre'.[24] In these instances, the lack or absence which motivates love is conceived positively, part of a spiritual response which lifts the lover beyond temporal identity. Through its philosophic or poetic utterance, the self is not destroyed but surpassed.

However, the link between lack and love can also affect selfhood less positively, even fatally. Classical texts again offer tropes and characters to Renaissance authors. Ovid depicts less drastic versions of desire and self-loss in the changes that Jove makes to pursue various nymphs. These can be read in varying ways – on the one hand, a carnivalesque switching of sexual roles for the sake of pleasure; on the other, a sequence of illusory identities that offers no final fulfilment. Though Jove's transformations bring different degrees of satisfaction, none is tragi-

cally oriented (at least for himself). In contrast, the tale of Narcissus sets desire and selfhood in irresolvable conflict. In Arthur Golding's 1567 translation of the *Metamorphoses*, Narcissus gazes into the pond to find that 'He knowes not what it was he sawe. And yet the foolishe elfe / Doth burn in ardent love thereof. The verie selfe same thing / That doeth bewitch and blinde his eyes, encreaseth all his sting'.[25] His desire cannot be satisfied, and the attempt to do so pains and then destroys selfhood.

Opposing notions of genre, time and character underlie these figures of ecstasy and loss. Platonic and Neoplatonic transcendence is marked by timelessness and selflessness. It brings narration and character to an end, as the self enjoys eternal fusion with the other. In comparison, Ovidian images of disguised or deluded self-loss entail conflict within or between characters. These interactions rely on distinct, often opposed, figures who respond to each other through time. Their fates frequently impose eternities of lonely, unfulfilled selfhood.

Platonic images of true desire and identity are invoked in Shakespeare's comedies during the 1590s; but even there, as characters move to romantic union, they are usually questioned. The disguises, confusions and mistakes through which love's destiny is reached may suggest random or enforced effects that unsettle 'nature's bias'. In a less equivocal way, Shakespeare's use of Ovidian images of desire and selfhood tends to limit or foreclose positive readings, especially where narcissistic traces are discerned. This tendency takes place in both comic and tragic genres: 'Like Ovid's tales, Shakespeare's comedies never lose sight of the

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[23] Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Sir Thomas Hoby (London, 1948), pp. 319–22.

[24] *Fowre Hymnes*, 'A Hymn in Honovr of Love' (lines 197–203) and 'A Hymne in Honovr of Heavenly Love' (lines 8–28), in *Spenser: Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. Smith and E. de Selincourt (Oxford, 1979).

[25] *Shakespeare's Ovid: Being Arthur Golding's Translation of the 'Metamorphoses'*, ed. W. H. D. Rouse (Carbondale, 1961), book 3: lines 540–2.

painfulness and the potential for the grotesque or for disaster wrought by love's changes ... If part of the Ovidianism of the comedies is their potential for violence and tragedy, it would seem logical to expect that Ovidianism to be developed in the tragedies'.[26] In *Venus and Adonis*, for example, the humour of the goddess's overweening desire and her beloved's petulance changes to grim consequence. 'The field's chief flower' (line 8) is mournfully plucked, recalling Narcissus's end, 'A purple flower sprung up, chequered with white, / Resembling well his pale cheeks, and the blood / Which in round drops upon their whiteness stood' (lines 1168–70). The characters have shared an ironic desire whose deathly goal was unwittingly imaged by Venus, 'Narcissus so himself himself forsook, / And died to kiss his shadow in the brook' (lines 161–2). As noted earlier, comparable effects occur throughout *Romeo and Juliet*, where moments of romantic union are disrupted by ongoing events that undercut their idealism. The mixed genres in these tales represent desire as a hybrid of the comic, tragic and ironic.[27]

Related images of threatening or incomplete desire and self-transformation are repeated through many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts, from the angst of sonneteers to Montaigne's musings in the *Apologie of Raymond Sebond* on 'The lustfull longing which allures us to the acquaintance of women, [and] seekes but to expell that paine, which an earnest and burning desire doth possesse-us-with, and desireth but to allay it thereby to come to rest, and be exempted from this fever'.[28] As most of these references suggest, this notion of erotic jeopardy is almost always tied to masculine conceptions of desire and selfhood. The pains of desire are indulged if not celebrated, and they may convert to misogyny, as in Hamlet's tirade against Ophelia or Romeo's charge that Juliet's beauty 'hath made me effeminate' (3.1.114).

This attitude echoes through Romeo's early laments about Rosaline. As Coleridge noted, he is 'introduced already love-bewildered':[29] 'I

have lost myself. I am not here. / This is not Romeo; he's some other where' (1.1.194–5). Amid these tones of despair a self-satisfied note can be heard. The early Romeo is a 'virtual stereotype of the romantic lover',[30] whose role-playing brings a kind of egotistic reassurance. The lament for self-loss becomes proof of self-presence, a 'boastful positiveness',[31] with Romeo still to know the unsettling force of desire.

From this point, the play proceeds by exploring the limits of the Platonic, Ovidian and Petrarchan tropes. The seriousness of narcissistic absorption is questioned (underlined by Mercutio's quips at romantic indulgence);[32] yet the full consequence of desire is not realized in Platonic union but deferred to its aftermath. None of the conventional models can quite convey what is at stake in the lovers' story, and the discourse of desire must be revised.

III

Clearly, then, *Romeo and Juliet* invents neither tragic nor personal notions of desire. Both are strongly at work in Shakespeare's direct source, Brooke's *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* (1562): the threats to selfhood caused by

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26 Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford, 1993), p. 173. Bate emphasizes Actaeon as another figure of self-consuming desire (p. 19 and *passim*).

27 Cf. George Bataille's conceptions of eros as 'laughable', tragic and 'arousing irony', and of 'The complicity of the tragic – which is the basis of death – with sexual pleasure and laughter': *The Tears of Eros*, trans. Peter Connor (San Francisco, 1990), pp. 53 and 66.

28 Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. John Florio (London, 1980), vol. 2, pp. 192–3.

29 Coleridge, *Lectures*, p. 103.

30 Harry Levin, 'Form and Formality in *Romeo and Juliet*', in *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of 'Romeo and Juliet': A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Douglas Cole (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), 85–95; p. 86.

31 Coleridge, *Lectures*, p. 103.

32 Joseph A. Porter emphasizes that Mercutio's opposition is to romantic love not to sex: *Shakespeare's Mercutio: His History and Drama* (Chapel Hill, 1988), p. 103.

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love; the workings of 'False Fortune' and 'wavering Fortunes whele'; an intense desire that can be quenched 'onely [by] death and both theyr bloods'; time as tragic and ironic, first intimated in woe at Juliet's 'untimely death' and then gaining full significance as Romeus's man tells him 'too soone' of her end.[33]

While it reiterates these ideas, Shakespeare's play also develops and sharpens the connections among desire, the personal and the tragic. The lovers create new images of individuality and of togetherness in order to leave their worldly selves behind. Yet their efforts remain circumscribed by social forces. The ironic result is that the ideal identities the lovers fashion in order to realize their desire become the key to its tragic loss. Self-transcendence can be experienced but not as a kind of timeless ecstasy; instead it becomes entwined with unfulfilled desire.

The play personalizes desire in ways which constantly alternate between idealism and failure. As Kay Stockholder notes, threats to desire are 'externalized' and the lovers consciously create 'a radiant world apart by attributing all inimical forces to surrounding circumstance'.[34] In this reordering of reality, desire becomes part or even constitutive of private, individual identity. Romeo and Juliet's love is secret from others and transgresses the roles imposed by their families. In *The Petite Pallace of Pettie his Pleasure* (1576), George Pettie considered this opposition the key to the story: 'such presiness of parents brought Pyramus and Thisbe to a woful end, Romeo and Julietta to untimely death'.[35] In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*, resisting or contesting patriarchal authority allows a temporary move towards selfhood.

Through this contest, love appears to be one's own, yet both plays show the impossibility of holding onto it. The personal is as elusive as it is idealized, destined to slip back into constraining and distorting social forms. In retrospect, we may see this elusiveness prefigured in the lovers' first meeting, an intense bonding that occurs amid an elaborate ritual of masks and misrecognition. The symbolic means through which love must be expressed will prevent its consummation.[36] For the moment, however, love beholds a single object of desire, whose truth authenticates the lover and re-creates both their identities: 'Deny thy father and refuse thy name, / Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, / And I'll no longer be a Capulet ... Call me but love and I'll be new baptized. / Henceforth I never will be Romeo' (2.1.76–93).

The nexus between identity and desire is strengthened by the need for secrecy. Hidden and equivocated as the lovers move between private and public realms, secret desire endows selfhood with interiority and intention. It grants a depth of character, and even if its longings are not fulfilled inner experience is confirmed. Juliet's cryptic replies to her mother's attack on Romeo reveal private pleasure couched in pain: 'O, how my heart abhors / To hear him named and cannot come to him / To wreak the love I bore my cousin / Upon his body that hath slaughtered him!' (3.5.99–102). Like secret desire, the obstacles to fulfilment sharpen internal experience and give it a kind of sensuous reality: 'runaways' eyes may wink, and Romeo / Leap to these arms untalked of and unseen. / Lovers can see to do their amorous rites / By their own beauties' (3.2.6–9).

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[33] Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 1 (London, 1966), lines 114, 210, 935, 2420 and 2532.

[34] Kay Stockholder, *Dream Works: Lovers and Families in Shakespeare's Plays* (Toronto, 1987), p. 30. In *Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare* (Chapel Hill, 1984), Marianne Novy sees that the lovers' private world crystallizes in the aubade of Act 2, scene 1 (p. 108).

[35] Bullough, *Sources*, vol. 1, p. 374.

[36] On the interplay among misrecognition, desire and the symbolic, see Catherine Belsey, 'The Name of the Rose in *Romeo and Juliet*', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 23 (1993), 126–42; on the significance of the lovers being masked from each other, see Barbara L. Parker, *A Precious Seeing: Love and Reason in Shakespeare's Plays* (New York, 1987), p. 142.

This deep desire and selfhood develop in terms of intentionality – desire *for* someone, effected through imagination, speech and action. Desire marks the self as agent, and tragic desire portrays the onus of agency. It is felt sharply by Juliet before she takes the friar's potion, 'My dismal scene I needs must act alone' (4.3.19), and by Romeo as he enters the Capulet tomb 'armed against myself' (5.3.65). In this sense, the play's depiction of desire is linked to representations of subjectivity that emerge during the sixteenth century. It reflects the important role that tropes such as the secret, with its social and personal disguises, have in discourses which are starting to inscribe both an inner self and the individual as agent.

Even as it invests in such notions of selfhood, at its most intense desire in *Romeo and Juliet* surpasses individual experience and realizes an intersubjective union. The lovers re-characterize each other as much as themselves: 'Romeo, doff thy name, / And for thy name – which is no part of thee – / Take all myself' (2.1.89–91). Again this effect has generic analogues, as we see the lovers' discourse moving beyond single-voiced Petrarchism. They share exchanges which reveal 'not only the other's confirming response, but also how we find ourselves in that response'.[37] Unlike contemporary sonnet sequences, which portray the poet by stifling the woman's voice (just as Romeo invokes and silences Rosaline), the play is marked by the lovers' dialogues. This reciprocity is epitomized by the sonnet they co-construct and seal with a kiss at their first meeting (1.5.92–105).[38] It is a highly suggestive moment, capturing the separateness of the lovers' world and speech from others, and also rewriting the dominant 1590s genre for representing desire. The sonnet is re-envoiced as dialogue, its meanings embodied in the climactic kiss. At the same time, the heightened artifice of the scene intimates its transience. The lovers start another sonnet but are interrupted by Juliet's garrulous nurse, who foreshadows the dire interventions of others. A further irony is also implied – as noted earlier,

their union will be ended by events that literalize poetic tropes of love and death: Romeo really does die 'with a kiss' (5.3.120), and Juliet falls in eternal sexual embrace, 'O happy dagger, / This is thy sheath! There rust, and let me die' (5.3.168–9).[39]

The deaths verify the Prologue's vision of inescapable ties between sex and violence. Not only can the lovers not escape the eternal feud that frames them, they even play parts in it, responding impulsively, at the threshold of nature and nurture, to news of Mercutio's and Tybalt's deaths. For a moment their union bows under its violent heritage as each impugns the other: 'O sweet Juliet, / Thy beauty hath made me effeminate, / And in my temper softened valour's steel' (3.1.113–15); 'did Romeo's hand shed Tybalt's blood? ... O serpent heart, hid with a flow'ring face!' (3.2.71–3)

Other characters also link sex and violence, suggesting that the connection has become naturalized and accepted. The Capulet servants joke aggressively about raping and killing the Montague women (1.1.22–4). The friar parallels birth and death, 'The earth, that's nature's mother, is her tomb. / What is her burying grave, that is her womb' (2.3.9–10), and is later echoed by Romeo, who calls the Capulet crypt a 'womb of death' (5.3.45). The friar also connects 'violent delights' to 'violent ends' (2.5.9), and the lovers' suicides suggest a final fusing of love and death. Yet as different interpretations maintain, this fusion's meaning may

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[37] Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York, 1988), p. 21.

[38] Edward Snow suggests that the sonnet registers 'an intersubjective privacy' that subdues 'sexual difference and social opposition': 'Language and Sexual Difference in *Romeo and Juliet*', in *Shakespeare's 'Rough magic': Renaissance Essays in Honor of C. L. Barber*, ed. Peter Erickson and Coppélia Kahn (Newark, 1985), pp. 168–92; p. 168; Novy contrasts this scene with the stichomythic exchange between Juliet and Paris at 4.1.18–38 (*Love's Argument*, p. 108).

[39] On the love-death oxymoron, cf. Whittier, 'Sonnet's Body', p. 32.

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be tragic, romantic, or both. The lovers are 'consumed and destroyed by the feud' and seem to rise above it, 'united in death'.[40]

The final scene thus accentuates the connections among selfhood, death and desire. It caps off the discourse of tragic desire announced by the Prologue – a tradition of failed love known through numerous European novellas, the second volume of *The Palace of Pleasure* (1567), and two editions of Brooke's *Tragicall Historye* (1562, 1587). The action has thus had a doubly repetitive stamp, not only replaying this oft-told tale but restaging what the Prologue has stated. Foreknowledge of the outcome plays off against moments of romantic and tragic intensity, and triggers a kind of anxious curiosity that waits to see the details of the deaths – the near misses of delayed messages, misread signs, plans gone awry.

Through this repetitive structure, the play affirms precedents and conditions for its own reproduction as if anticipating future responses. Before ending, it even shows these possibilities being realized. The grieving fathers decide to build statues of the lovers, and the prince's final lines look forward to 'more talk of these sad things', in an effort to establish once and for all what desire's tragic end might mean (5.3.306). As Dympna Callaghan observes, the play not only 'perpetuates an already well-known tale', but its closure is predicated on 'the possibility of endless retellings of the story – displacing the lovers' desire onto a perpetual narrative of love'.[41]

Patterns of repetition weave through the play as well as framing it. Characters constantly restate what has previously been staged – in the first scene Benvolio explains how the opening brawl started, and later he recounts details of Mercutio's and Tybalt's deaths and Romeo's involvement; the Chorus to the second act reiterates the lovers' meeting; the Nurse tells Juliet of Tybalt's death; the Capulets and Paris echo each other's lamentations over Juliet's apparent death;[42] and lastly the Friar recaps the whole plot to the other characters after the

bodies are found. These instances are part of the effort to explain the violent meaning of events, but as the prince's closing words suggest, something extra needs to be told, 'never was a story of more woe / Than this of Juliet and her Romeo' (5.3.308–9). There is a sense that 'this' version of the story exceeds earlier ones. For all its repetition of tropes and narratives, in closing the play recognizes and stresses a difference from precursors.

Other repetitive designs through the play are used to underline the tension between desire and death. Four meetings and kisses shared by Romeo and Juliet structure the romance plot. They are in counterpoint to four violent or potentially violent eruptions that occur between the male characters, especially involving Tybalt. A muted fifth interruption is provided by the presence of Tybalt's corpse in the Capulet crypt where Juliet and Romeo finally meet and miss each other. These turbulent scenes frame the romantic ones, unsettling the lyric and erotic essence which they seem to capture.

The repetitions and retellings connect with the representation of time in the play, imposing a destructive pressure between the weight of social and family history and personal longings. Social and personal time are opposed, and desire is caught between these conflicting time frames. Social time is frequently indexed through the play, in general terms such as the 'ancient grudge' and through the scheduling of specific events such as Capulet's banquet and Juliet's

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40 Coppélia Kahn, 'Coming of Age in Verona', in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana, 1980), pp. 171–93; p. 186. Marilyn Williamson regards the deaths as alienating rather than uniting, 'Romeo's suicide fulfills a pattern to which Juliet is both necessary and accidental': 'Romeo and Death', *Shakespeare Studies*, 14 (1981), 129–37; p. 132.
41 Callaghan, 'Ideology', p. 61.
42 See Thomas Moisan, 'Rhetoric and the Rehearsal of Death: the "Lamentations" Scene in *Romeo and Juliet*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 34 (1983), 389–404.

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wedding to Paris. Against this scheme, the lovers' meetings seem to dissolve time, making it speed up or, more powerfully, stop and stand still, as the present is transformed into 'the time of love'.[43] The lovers seek to disregard time and death in their union, 'Then love-devouring death do what he dare – It is enough I may but call her mine' (2.5.7–8). Yet this passionate energy also drives the drama to its finale, and Romeo's words link their union and separation with death. The time of love confronts the passing of its own presence.

In various ways, then, *Romeo and Juliet* renovates tragic desire for the Elizabethans and for subsequent periods. In early scenes it evokes a narcissistic poetics of desire as self-loss and death but moves beyond that to stage a dialogic reciprocal presence. The reappearance of death then inscribes ineluctable external influences – the determinations of time and history which frame desire – and the impossible idealization of self and other which passion seeks but fails to find. In this sense, Shakespeare's play marks a complex intersection between historical and emergent discourses of desire. First, in a period when modern institutions of family, marriage and romance are starting to appear, it translates Platonic, Ovidian and Petrarchan tropes of ecstasy and love into personal notions of desire. Next, it conceives desire as the interplay between passion, selfhood and death. And thirdly, its equivocal staging of love's death anticipates the tension between romantic and sceptical visions of desire that runs through many later literary and theoretical works.

It could be said that the play's symbolic bequest to these works is a notion of desire as lost presence. Though love continues to be celebrated as present or absent or present-in-absence in many texts (in different ways, Herbert's poetry and Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* come to mind), a significant line of literary works explores the interplay among desire,

death and selfhood. Like *Romeo and Juliet*, these texts place desire in conflict with time, recounting moments of ideal presence whose future reveals they could never have been. This revision of desire begins with Shakespeare's later tragedies – *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra* – where one lover survives, though briefly, to feel the other's loss. It runs from the fallen lovers of *Paradise Lost* ('we are one, / One flesh; to lose thee were to lose myself' [9.958–9]), to the equivocal pairings at the end of Dickens's great novels or the images of foreclosed desire in Henry James's major phase. Its most poignant statement comes at the close of Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*:

the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . . And one fine morning –

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

If *Romeo and Juliet* helps to initiate this tradition, it does so as the last tragedy of desire. For in these later texts the note is of melancholic rather than tragic loss: what hurts is not that desire ends in death but that it ends before death. The present then becomes a time for recounting lost desire, and the self's task is to try to hold the story together. 'The subject's centre of gravity is this present synthesis of the past which we call history', writes Lacan.[44] Like Romeo's last letter, this history reveals the 'course of love' (5.3.286) to those who remain.

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[43] Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, 1987), p. 213.

[44] *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book 1, *Freud's Papers on Technique 1953–1954*, trans. John Forrester (New York, 1991), p. 36. On literature and psychoanalysis as twin discourses of mourning and melancholia, see Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard, *After Oedipus: Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, 1993), esp. pp. 32–3.