

The Star-Cross'd Passage:

Pervasive Premonitions of Death in *Romeo and Juliet*

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Romeo and Juliet is unique among Shakespeare's tragedies in two respects. At the very beginning of the play, we are informed how the tale ends. The Chorus gives us a succinct summary of the story in an introductory sonnet: two families are in conflict with each other, and it takes their children's deaths to bring about peace between them. Furthermore, unlike other tragedies, there is no precipitating villain in the piece, such as Iago in *Othello* or Edmund in *King Lear*. Romeo and Juliet's misfortune is not caused by any villain, but their love is seemingly fated for disaster, which is the meaning of "star-cross'd" in the Prologue:

CHORUS Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the **fatal** loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life,
Whose misadventur'd piteous overthrows

Doth **with their death** bury their parents' strife.
The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love
And the continuance of their parents' rage,
Which, but **their children's end**, naught could remove,
Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;
The which, if you with patient ears attend,
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.

(Prologue, 1-14)¹⁾

Even though we ordinarily consider *Romeo and Juliet* to be the quintessential passionate love story, we may be surprised, upon looking closely, to find so many premonitions of death throughout the text, even in the most romantic scenes.²⁾ Sometimes the reference is obvious in the vocabulary, but sometimes it appears in evocative imagery. In following the passage of their love story, we will see that their love is literally “death-mark’d” from the beginning to the end.

Parental Concern

Before he meets Juliet, Romeo is in love with the unseen Rosaline, Capulet's niece. When Lady Montague asks after the missing Romeo's whereabouts, Benvolio tells her that he has seen him roaming in a grove of sycamore, pensive and distraught about his unrequited love for Rosaline. It soon becomes clear that Romeo is enjoying his performance as an afflicted Petrarchan lover, but Montague expresses his concern for his son in terms of rather surprising seriousness:

Unfortunately, the impetuous Tybalt, Juliet's cousin, has recognized Romeo, and the threat to Romeo's life is immediate:

TYBALT This by his voice should be a Montague.

Fetch me my rapier, boy. *Exit boy.*

What, dares the slave

Come hither, cover'd with an antic face,

To flear and scorn at our solemnity?

Now by the stock and honour of my kin,

To strike him dead I hold it not a sin. (1.5.54–59)

As Frank Kermode has noted, "Romeo's earlier forebodings are here confirmed: the announcement of love is followed at once by the threat of conflict" (*Shakespeare's Language*, 56). In hindsight, this juxtaposition of falling in love and immediately following threat of death appears to cast a curse on the entire story. Capulet prevents any rash action and scolds Tybalt for his intent to break the peace, but Tybalt retires from the scene while uttering another dire threat: "I will withdraw; but his intrusion shall / Now seeming sweet, convert to bitt'rest gall" (1.5.91–92).

Meanwhile, Romeo and Juliet express their attraction to each other in the form of a shared sonnet (1.5.93–106), and they kiss twice without knowing each other's identity. (Even though this sonnet is beautiful, it also contains some religious imagery related tangentially to death—"holy shrine," "pilgrims," "saints," and "palmers.") It is only when her Nurse comes to fetch Juliet to her mother that Romeo learns who she is:

ROMEO

Is she a Capulet?

O dear account. My life is my foe's debt. (1.5.117-18)

Here, Romeo's strong reaction is understandable, and the accountancy terms he uses suggest his life may be in the balance. Juliet's choice of expression is even more striking. Juliet sends her Nurse to find who the appealing young man is, and her response merges the images of death and marriage:

JULIET Go ask his name. If he be married,
 My grave is like to be my wedding bed.

NURSE His name is Romeo, and a Montague,
 The only son of your great enemy.

JULIET My only love sprung from my only hate.
 Too early seen unknown, and known too late.
 Prodigious birth of love it is to me
 That I must love a loathed enemy. (1.5.134-141)

Juliet learns that she has fallen in love with the only son of Montague, and thus she terms her newly born love "prodigious," which at that time had the meaning of "ominous."

The Balcony Scene

Act 2 begins with the second and last appearance of the Chorus, which in effect tells us that Romeo no longer desires Rosaline because he is now in love with Juliet, but the first two lines again incorporate the image of death:

CHORUS Now old desire doth in his deathbed lie
 And young affection gapes to be his heir; (2.0.1-2)

Romeo's old love for Rosaline lies in its "deathbed," and his new love for Juliet "gapes" to replace the old one. A gloss may inform us that "gapes" in this instance means "longs" or "yearns," but in its sense of "opening wide," the word "gape" can also evoke the image of hell. Hamlet uses this term when he and Horatio are talking about his father's ghost—"If it assume my noble father's person, / I'll speak to it though hell itself should gape / And bid me hold my peace (*Hamlet*, 1.2.244-46)—and Shakespeare's contemporary Christopher Marlowe uses it in *Doctor Faustus*, when Faustus desperately tries to avoid his dire fate: "Ugly hell, gape not. Come not Lucifer!" (*Doctor Faustus*, Sc. 14). For Romeo's new love to be described in these terms is ominous indeed.

After leaving the Capulets' feast, while Mercutio and Benvolio teasingly search and wait for him to appear, Romeo remains behind, saying: "Can I go forward when my heart is here? / Turn back, dull earth, and find thy centre out" (2.1.1-2). In referring to his body as "dull earth," Romeo again calls up a suggestion of death, as in the burial prayer "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

The emblematic balcony scene is filled with beautiful poetry, but even here we cannot avoid noticing the recurring images of death. After pouring out her affection for Romeo and her distress about his being a Montague, Juliet realizes that she is not alone. When she finds out that it is the very Romeo she has been apostrophizing who is in the Capulets' orchard, she immediately worries about his safety:

JULIET How cam'st 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,³⁾
 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.

ROMEO I have night's cloak to hide me from their eyes,
 And but thou love me, let them find me here.
 My life were better ended by their hate
 Than death prorogued, wanting of thy love. (2.2.62-78)

Juliet's apprehension is understandable given the perilous situation, and Romeo's exaggerated words arise out of the exaltation of being passionately in love, but, in retrospect, even at the height of their mutual proclamation of love, we find a surprising number of embedded references to death: her kinsmen might murder him, her eyes are more threat than her kinsmen's swords, and he would prefer death to not being loved by her.

Enraptured as they are, it is hard for them to part, but dawn is breaking and the morning brings the danger of exposure. Juliet

wishes she could keep Romeo like a pet bird, and Romeo would be happy to be kept, despite the danger:

ROMEO I would I were thy bird.

JULIET Sweet, so would I:

Yet I should kill thee with much cherishing.

Good night, good night. Parting is such sweet sorrow

That I shall say good night till it be morrow. (2.2.182-85)

At the end of this romantic night of their first meeting, Juliet words are sadly prophetic, for their “much cherishing” will lead to their deaths.

At Friar Laurence's Herb Garden

After this romantic balcony scene, Friar Laurence appears with a basket to pick some mixed herbs—“baleful weeds and precious-juiced flowers” (2.3.4)—in his garden. His lengthy speech in couplets on the effects of herbs contains some portentous lines:

FRIAR LAURENCE

The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb:

What is her burying grave, that is her womb.

.....

O, mickle is the powerful grace that lies

In plants, herbs, stones, and their true qualities.

.....

Within the infant rind of this weak flower

Poison hath residence, and medicine power:
For this, being smelt, with that part cheers each part;
Being tasted, stays all senses with the heart.
(2.3.5-6, 11-12, 19-22)

As Tony Tanner observes, “In his long disquisition on the properties of herbs, the Friar foregrounds their doubleness” (*Prefaces to Shakespeare*, 106), and this “doubleness” of medicine will be carried over later in the play to Juliet’s distilled potion and Romeo’s poison.

Romeo confides to Friar Laurence that he and the Capulets’ daughter have fallen in love, and he asks the Friar to marry them. The surprised Friar scolds Romeo for having changed the object of his love so quickly from Rosaline to Juliet:

ROMEO Thou chid’st me oft for loving Rosaline.
FRIAR LAURENCE For doting, not for loving, pupil mine.
ROMEO And bad’st me bury love.
FRIAR LAURENCE Not in a grave
 To lay one in, another out to have. (2.3.77-80)

Romeo makes the excuse that he has followed the Friar’s advice to “bury” his love for Rosaline, and the Friar carries on the metaphor, referring to laying (burying) a lapsed love “in a grave,” thus further conjoining the notions of love and death.

Friar Laurence sees in the two young lovers the possibility of reconciling the two feuding houses, so he consents to marry them. When Romeo urges the Friar, “O let us hence: I stand on sudden

haste," the Friar cautions him, "Wisely and slow; they stumble that run fast" (2.3.89-90). Even in the rapture of newly found love, Juliet was apprehensive about too much haste—"It is too rash, too unadvis'd, too sudden, / Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be / Ere one can say 'It lightens'" (2.2.118-120)—but at this restive moment Romeo is not afraid of any stumbling.

Nurse's Errand

That same morning, Mercutio and Benvolio are talking about Romeo, who did not return home the previous night. They know that Tybalt has written a letter of challenge to Montague regarding his son's intrusion on the Capulets' feast. Benvolio believes that Romeo will accept the challenge, but Mercutio is doubtful:

MERCUTIO Alas poor Romeo, he is already dead, stabbed
 with a white wench's black eye, run through the ear with a
 love song, the very pin of his heart cleft with the blind
 bow-boy's butt-shaft. (2.4.14-17)

Of course, Mercutio is jokingly talking about Romeo's previous love-sick state, when he had been "stabbed" by Rosaline's eyes and his heart "cleft" with Cupid's arrow, but to declare him "already dead," even in jest, provides yet another threatening resonance.

When Romeo joins them, Mercutio continues to tease and match wits with Romeo, but their bantering is interrupted when Juliet's Nurse appears. Juliet has sent her only confidant to learn from Romeo his intentions concerning their wedding. He tells her that

Juliet is to be at Friar Laurence's cell that afternoon, where they will be "shrived and married." He also tells her that his man will deliver a rope ladder—"cords made like a tackled stair"—so that he may ascend to Juliet's window "in the secret night."

Meanwhile, Juliet has been impatiently waiting for her Nurse to return, complaining at length over her tardiness:

JULIET 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.
 Had she affections and warm youthful blood
 She would be as swift in motion as a ball:
 My words would bandy her to my sweet love,
 And his to me.
 But old folks, many feign as they were dead—
 Unwieldy, slow, heavy, and pale as lead. (2.5.9-17)

Juliet is in a state of blissful anxiety, and her exasperation here is understandable. After all, she is waiting for Romeo's answer, and the Nurse, who had promised to be back in half an hour, has still not returned after three long, vexing hours, but the expression "feign as they were dead" seems unnecessarily morbid in this case. Moreover, it is a painfully ironic expression because it is the youthful Juliet who will soon be compelled to feign death.

Once she returns, the Nurse keeps Juliet in suspense with her digressions, but she finally tells Juliet to go immediately to Friar Laurence's cell, where Romeo is waiting for her and where they will

be wed.

At Friar Laurence's Cell

From the first two lines of the brief scene, we can perceive Friar Laurence's nervousness at secretly marrying these two children from the two feuding families, and he prays that no punishment will befall the marriage:

FRIAR LAURENCE

So smile the heavens upon this holy act
That after-hours with sorrow chide us not.

ROMEO Amen, amen, but come what sorrow can,
It cannot countervail the exchange of joy
That one short minute gives me in her sight.
Do thou but close our hands with holy words,
Then love-devouring death do what he dare:
It is enough I may but call her mine.

FRIAR LAURENCE

These violent delights have violent ends
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,
Which as they kiss consume. The sweetest honey
Is loathsome in his own deliciousness,
And in the taste confounds the appetite.
Therefore love moderately; long love doth so.
Too swift arrives as tardy as too slow. (2.6.1-15)

In this exchange, the eager Romeo seems to be unintentionally

calling down a curse on the marriage. He proclaims that he can accept whatever sorrow may come if he can see Juliet just “one short minute.” He declares that if he can have Juliet as his wife, he does not care whatever “love-devouring death” will do to them. In these ardent declarations of his love for Juliet, Romeo has unknowingly summarized their immediate future. The Friar again warns Romeo about his impatience and hastiness, and Tony Tanner offers this succinct observation: “In many ways these lines sum up the play” (*Prefaces to Shakespeare*, 101). The Friar’s words concerning the brief, combustible union of fire and powder contain an echo of Juliet’s “lightning” speech (2.2.116-120). Tanner compares the “lightning” speeches of Juliet and Lysander (94), but Lysander’s famous line, “So quick bright things come to confusion” (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 1.1.149), is also just a shorter version of what the Friar is saying here.⁴

The Killing of Mercutio and Tybalt

The crisis of the plot occurs just after the marriage, at the beginning of Act 3, when Romeo becomes involved in the fight between Mercutio and Tybalt. Tybalt tries to inflame Romeo, but Romeo refuses to fight because he is now his cousin-in-law, even though he cannot announce it. The brawl soon develops into a sword fight, and Romeo’s intervention turns out to be disastrous when Tybalt thrusts his sword under Romeo’s arm and stabs Mercutio:

MERCUTIO I am hurt.

 A plague o’ both your houses. I am sped.

.....

Help me into some house, Benvolio,
Or I shall faint. A plague o' both your houses,
They have made worms' meat of me.
I have it, and soundly too. Your houses! (3.1.91–91, 106–09)

Mercutio is neither Montague nor Capulet. He is the bawdy jester of the play, but he is also a kinsman of the Prince of Verona, and therefore he might also be considered as an authoritative voice, and now that voice repeatedly declaims a serious curse on both houses.⁵⁾ Harold Bloom notes the weight that Mercutio's words have here: "That indeed is what in his death Mercutio becomes, a plague upon both Romeo of the Montagues and Juliet of the Capulets, since henceforward the tragedy speeds on to its final double catastrophe (*Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, 96). This curse—a plague—will prove to be the major obstacle to Romeo and Juliet's happiness later in the play, when a crucial letter to Romeo is prevented from being delivered because of an outbreak of the deadly sickness.

Benvolio's "O Romeo, Romeo, brave Mercutio is dead" (3.1.117) reminds us of Juliet's "O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?" (2.2.33), but Benvolio is announcing Mercutio's death, which, far from being a proclamation of love, heralds a series of disasters, and Romeo feels the curse has now befallen them:

ROMEO This day's black fate on mo days doth depend:
 This but begins the woe others must end. (3.1.120–21)

Romeo, driven by grief and anger, conducted by “fire-ey’d fury” (3.1.125), kills Tybalt, then immediately realizes the seriousness of this offence against the Prince’s order. Benvolio urges him to go away: “The Prince will doom thee death / If thou art taken” (3.1.135–36). Romeo’s famous line, “O, I am fortune’s fool” (3.1.137), along with the “fire-ey’d fury” that blinded him, emphasizes the notion that the ensuing tragedy occurs because of fate, not because of any villain, and Frank Kermode calls it “a malignant fate or a series of unhappy accidents” (*Shakespeare’s Language*, 53).

Benvolio defends Romeo in front of the Prince, the Montagues, and the Capulets, but Lady Capulet, who has lost her nephew Tybalt, asks for Romeo’s life to be forfeit: “Romeo slew Tybalt. Romeo must not live” (3.1.182). Since Tybalt first killed Mercutio, the Prince’s judgement is lenient toward Romeo, though there still is another prophetic threat in his sentence: “Let Romeo hence in haste, / Else, when he is found, that hour is his last” (3.1.195–96).

Juliet’s Plunge from Bliss to Despair

Unaware of what has happened and Romeo’s subsequent banishment, Juliet exults in the prospect of their wedding night together after their secret marriage by Friar Laurence:

JULIET Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,
 Towards Phoebus’ lodging. Such a waggoner
 As Phaeton would whip you to the west
 And bring in cloudy night immediately.
 Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night,

That runaway's eyes may wink, and Romeo
Leap to these arms untalk'd-of and unseen. (3.2.1-7)

Here is Tony Tanner on the significance and implications of the allusion to Phaeton from Greek mythology:

Juliet's invocation to Phoebus *and Phaeton*, as she waits for Romeo on her bridal night, is understandable, apt—and ominous. . . . She wants the sun to sink and night to fall as quickly as possible—of course she does. And, as we have seen Romeo “leap” the orchard wall, we may be confident that he will manage this longed-for leap as well. But “such a wagoner / As Phaeton” (son of Phoebus) was too reckless and inexperienced; when he took over the horses of the sun, he could not control them—they ran unstoppably wild, and he fell, fatally, to earth.⁶ (*Prefaces to Shakespeare*, 98-99)

At the apex of Juliet's happiness, Shakespeare chooses to allude to the reckless Phaeton who went against his father's caution and was killed.

Juliet goes on summoning “civil night” to come, which she personifies as a “sober-suited matron all in black” and bearing a “black mantle” (3.2.10-15). Naturally, night is associated with darkness, which Juliet here longs for as the time she will consummate her marriage, but it also sounds as though night is wearing the black associated with mourning, which anticipates what is to come. Additionally, in a parallel to Romeo's declarations to Friar Laurence,

Juliet asks “gentle night” to make a constellation of Romeo in the night sky after she dies:

JULIET Come gentle night, come loving black-brow'd night,
 Give me my Romeo; and when I shall die
 Take him and cut him out in little stars,
 And he will make the face of heaven so fine
 That all the world will be in love with night,
 And pay no worship to the garish sun. (3.2.20-25)

As if Juliet were inadvertently putting a curse upon herself, immediately after this speech of exultation, her Nurse brings in the news of Tybalt's death and Romeo's banishment, but at first Juliet misunderstands that it is Romeo who is dead:

JULIET O break, my heart. Poor bankrupt, break at once.
 To prison, eyes, ne'er look on liberty.
 Vile earth to earth resign, end motion here,
 And thou and Romeo press one heavy bier. (3.2.57-60)

Just as Romeo earlier terms his body “dull earth” (2.1.2), so Juliet here refers to her body as “earth” and orders it to return to earth. When Romeo uses this term, there is still a Petrarchan playfulness about it, but here it sounds a more funereal note, and the last line will turn out to be sadly prophetic.

When she learns that it was actually Tybalt who was slain and that Romeo has been banished from Verona for the killing, her

sorrow intensifies to the point that she would even prefer to hear of her parents' death rather than Romeo's banishment. For Juliet, Romeo's banishment means everybody's death, including her own:

JULIET But with a rearward following Tybalt's death,
 "Romeo is banished": to speak that word
Is father, mother, Tybalt, Romeo, Juliet,
All slain, all dead. Romeo is banished,
There is no end, no limit, measure, bound,
In that word's death. No words can that woe sound.
(3.2.121-26)

As Romeo had promised to the Nurse, the rope ladder has been delivered, and Juliet instructs the Nurse to carry it to her chamber:

JULIET Take up those cords. Poor ropes, you are beguil'd
 Both you and I, for Romeo is exil'd.
He made you for a highway to my bed,
But I, a maid, die maiden-widowed.
Come, cords, come, Nurse, I'll to my wedding bed,
And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead.
.....
O find him, give this ring to my true knight
And bid him come to take his last farewell.
(3.2.132-37, 142-43)

Juliet will retire to her "wedding bed," but she grieves that it will be

And say'st thou yet that exile is not death?
Hadst thou no poison mix'd, no sharp-ground knife,
No sudden mean of death, though ne'er so mean,
But "banished" to kill me? (3.3.29-33, 43-46)

In his misery, Romeo would prefer a speedier manner of death rather than banishment, and his request for "poison" or a "sharp-ground knife" is yet another adumbration of the tragic ending that follows. Romeo says that the counseling Friar would be acting just the same if he were as young and as in love with Juliet; that he would be tearing his hair and falling upon the ground, just as Romeo, "Taking the measure of an unmade grave" (3.3.65-70).

It is at this point that the Nurse arrives at Friar Laurence's cell, and she tells the Friar and Romeo of Juliet's agony. Upon hearing her description, Romeo tries to stab himself. Once again the Friar tries to comfort Romeo, this time with a lengthy counsel, but it also contains more references to death:

FRIAR LAURENCE

Hast thou slain Tybalt? Wilt thou slay thyself?
And slay thy lady that in thy life lives,
By doing damned hate upon thyself? (3.3.116-18)

Friar Laurence encourages Romeo to accept banishment, persuading him to spend the wedding night with Juliet and leave Verona early in the morning for Mantua, where he is to stay and await the news of some way to reunite. He enumerates the reasons for Romeo to be

thankful, and he admonishes him for being ungrateful: “Take heed, take heed, for such die miserable” (3.3.145).

Romeo and Juliet’s Parting

While Capulet is hurriedly deciding to marry Juliet to Count Paris in a few days, Romeo and Juliet spend their first (and last) night together. In this poignant yet beautiful morning scene, Juliet tries to make Romeo believe that it is not yet morning—that what they hear is a nightingale, not a lark. Romeo gently contradicts her, saying, “I must be gone and live, or stay and die” (3.5.11), but when Juliet insists it is not daylight they perceive, just some meteor, Romeo willingly succumbs to her illusion:

ROMEO Let me be ta’en, let me be put to death,
 I am content, so thou wilt have it so. (3.5.17-18)

Now he joins her pretense, and he even challenges fate: “Come death, and welcome” (3.5.24). This reminder of the danger Romeo faces startles Juliet out of her fancy, and now she urges Romeo to leave: “O now be gone, more light and light it grows.” Romeo’s response underscores the paradox of their situation—“More light and light: more dark and dark our woes” (3.5.35-36)—and we are well aware the dawning day will not be a jocund one for them.

Before Romeo can leave, the Nurse comes to caution Juliet that Lady Capulet is on the way to her chamber, so the two can no longer linger over their farewells:

JULIET O think'st thou we shall ever meet again?
ROMEO I doubt it not, and all these woes shall serve
 For sweet discourses in our times to come.
JULIET 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.
 Either my eyesight fails, or thou look'st pale.
ROMEO And trust me, love, in my eye so do you.
 Dry sorrow drinks our blood. Adieu, adieu. (3.5.51-59)

Romeo descends to the orchard, and Juliet's perspective while looking down at him from above—"I see thee now. . . As one dead in the bottom of a tomb"—seems to doom their future, and we might anticipate that they shall never meet again, that they will not live to see their "times to come" that Romeo is sure will be filled with "sweet discourses." After Romeo leaves, Juliet prays for Fortune to be "fickle" so that Fortune will not keep him long—

JULIET O Fortune, Fortune! All men call thee fickle;
 If thou art fickle, what dost thou with him
 That is renown'd for faith? Be fickle, Fortune,
 For then I hope thou wilt not keep him long,
 But send him back. (3.5.60-64)—

but her prayer, following upon Romeo's exclamation at the killing of Tybalt, "O, I am fortune's fool!" (3.1.137), makes us feel that fickle Fortune will continue crossing them.

Parents' Condemnation, Nurse's Betrayal

Lady Capulet comes to Juliet's chamber to tell her about the planned marriage. Upon seeing her in tears, the first thing Lady Capulet says to her daughter—"Evermore weeping for your cousin's death? / What, wilt thou wash him from his grave with tears? / And if thou couldst, thou couldst not make him live" (3.5.69-71)—contains the familiar vocabulary of death, graves, and tears. Lady Capulet, who has something of Lady Macbeth in her personality, believes that Juliet is crying for her cousin Tybalt, and she promises to take vengeance:

LADY CAPULET . . . I'll send to one in Mantua,
Where that same banish'd runagate doth live,
Shall give him such an unaccustom'd dram
That he shall soon keep Tybalt company. (3.5.88-91)

Lady Capulet's "unaccustom'd dram" eerily links to what Friar Laurence had earlier said about the poison that might reside within a flower, and the repeated references to poison and poisoning form another ominously dark stratum within the play.

To further console her daughter, Lady Capulet informs Juliet of her husband's decision to marry her to Count Paris in a mere two days, but Juliet, already secretly married, could not possibly accept her father's plan. Capulet enters the chamber, and, seeing Juliet in tears, uses nautical metaphors to reproach her:

CAPULET . . . In one little body

Thou counterfeitst a bark, a sea, a wind.
For still thy eyes, which I may call the sea,
Do ebb and flow with tears. The bark thy body is,
Sailing in this salt flood, the winds thy sighs,
Who raging with thy tears and they with them,
Without a sudden calm will overset
Thy tempest-tossed body. (3.5.130-37)

Though using similar imagery, her father's speech is far different from the exhilarated proclamations of love by Romeo—"I am no pilot, yet wert thou as far / As that vast shore wash'd with the farthest sea, / I should adventure for such merchandise" (2.2.82-84)—and by Juliet—"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" (2.2.133-35)—during the romantic balcony scene.

Both Lady Capulet and Capulet become angry because of their daughter's apparently ungrateful refusal, and Lady Capulet's stinging rebuke—"I would the fool were married to her grave" (3.5.140)—and Capulet's blustering threat—"And you be mine I'll give you to my friend; / And you be not, hang! Beg! Starve! Die in the streets!" (3.5.191-92)—are both harshly condemning. After her father storms out of the chamber, Juliet begs her mother in the same death-evoking terms:

JULIET O sweet my mother, cast me not away,
 Delay this marriage for a month, a week,
 Or if you do not, make the bridal bed

In that dim monument where Tybalt lies. (3.5.198-201)

Lady Capulet's rejoinder, "Talk not to me, for I'll not speak a word. / Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee" (3.5.202-03), is a chillingly cold response as a mother, but what actually drives Juliet further into desperation is the advice of her only confidant:

JULIET Oh God, O Nurse, how shall this be prevented?

.....

What sayst thou? Hast thou not a word of joy?

Some comfort, Nurse?

NURSE Faith, here it is.

Romeo is banish'd, 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.

.....

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. (3.5.204, 211-17, 224-25)

Not only does the Nurse fail to give Juliet any desperately needed comfort, but she also urges her to give up Romeo and willingly commit bigamy. The curses that follow the departed Nurse—"Ancient damnation! O most wicked fiend" (3.5.235)—make it clear

how bitterly disappointed Juliet is. The Nurse could not live up to Juliet's expectation when it most mattered. Harold Bloom calls another duality to our attention—"The two fatal figures in the play are its two liveliest comics, Mercutio and the Nurse" (*Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, 97)—and it is another dark irony that Romeo and Juliet's closest friends become the driving force of some desperate actions. Having lost her one confidant in the family, Juliet can only turn to Friar Laurence: "I'll to the Friar to know his remedy. / If all else fail, myself have power to die" (3.5.241-42). At this extreme, even Juliet's choice of the word "remedy" seems to evoke the threatening image of poison.

Friar Laurence's Remedy

At Friar Laurence's cell, Juliet meets the happy bridegroom-to-be, Paris, who has come to arrange the ceremony. This encounter with Paris, who already calls her "my lady and my wife" (4.1.18), heightens Juliet's urgency to avoid the threatened wedding. Her desperate plea to Friar Laurence for help is scattered through with threats of killing herself with the potentially "bloody knife" she is carrying, and her determination is blatantly clear: "I long to die / If what thou speak'st speak not of remedy" (4.1.66-67). When Friar Laurence understands the strength of her resolution, he reluctantly offers her his drastic solution:

FRIAR LAURENCE

If, rather than to marry County Paris,
Thou hast the strength of will to slay thyself,

Then is it likely thou wilt undertake
A thing like death too chide away this shame,
That cop'st with death himself to scape from it.
And if thou dar'st, I'll give thee remedy. (4.1.71-76)

To avoid marrying Paris and thus avoid the shame of betraying her love for Romeo and entering a bigamous marriage, Juliet must have the courage to “slay” herself and undertake a “thing like death.” Since she swears she “will do it without fear or doubt, / To live an unstain'd wife to my sweet love” (4.1. 87-88), Friar Laurence provides his remedy:

Take thou this vial, being then in bed,
And this distilling liquor drink thou off;
When presently through all thy veins shall run
A cold and drowsy humour, for no pulse
Shall keep his native progress, but surcease:
No warmth, no breath shall testify thou livest,
The roses in thy lips and cheeks shall fade
To wanny ashes, thy eyes' windows fall
Like death when he shuts up the day of life. (4.1.93-101)

Juliet is supposed to take the “distilling liquor” in order to feign death. Friar Laurence explains the further steps in his plan—he will write a letter to Romeo informing him of this plan and summoning him to the Capulets' vault to retrieve Juliet after her forty-two-hours' death-like sleep. He adds a final assurance: “I'll send a friar with

speed / To Mantua with my letters to thy lord" (4.1.123-24). Given the Friar's earlier caution to Romeo regarding hasty action—"They stumble that run fast" (2.3.90)—we have more than an inkling that the Friar's desperate plan will go awry.

Juliet's Feigned Death

Following Friar Laurence's instruction, that evening Juliet pretends to have become obedient to her father's wish, and Capulet is so happy that he moves the wedding up to the very next day and orders the household to hastily prepare. Alone in her chamber, Juliet is frightened at the thought of a few dire possibilities—"What if this mixture do not work at all? . . . What if it be a poison which the Friar / Subtly hath minister'd to have me dead . . .?" (4.3.21, 24-25), but her most poignant fear concerns the timing of Romeo's arrival: "How if, when I am laid into the tomb, / I wake before the time that Romeo / Come to redeem me?" (4.3.30-32). It is only to be expected that the young Juliet would be frightened by the possibility of waking alone in such a dreadful place—"Where for this many hundred years the bones / Of all my buried ancestors are pack'd, / Where bloody Tybalt yet but green in earth / Lies festering in his shroud" (4.3.40-43)—but in that case, as terrifying as she would have found it, they would not have had to die.

Next morning, the Nurse finds Juliet dead. Capulet's heartfelt lament—"Death lies on her like an untimely frost / Upon the sweetest flower of all the field" (4.5.28-29)—hauntingly reminds us of Montague's much earlier expression of concern for his secretive love-sick son—"As is the bud bit with an envious worm / Ere he can

spread his sweet leaves to the air / Or dedicate his beauty to the sun” (1.1.151-53)—and in the horticultural link we recognize yet another bleak symmetry in the feuding families.

Paris arrives to take Juliet to church, and Capulet informs him of her death: “Oh son, the night before thy wedding day / Hath Death lain with thy wife. . . . Death is my son-in-law, Death is my heir” (4.4.35-36, 38). Seeing Capulet, Lady Capulet, Paris, and the Nurse lamenting over Juliet’s death, Friar Laurence makes a long half-scolding, half-consoling speech, employing the stock Christian nostrum that going to Heaven is the best thing for Juliet, and therefore they should not grieve for her:

FRIAR LAURENCE . . . 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.

.

She’s not well married that lives married long,
But she’s best married that dies married young.

(4.4.66-70, 77-78)

Since he knows that Juliet is not actually dead, the Friar may offer this comfort somewhat lightheartedly, but his glib and jarringly peculiar assurance that “she’s best married that dies married young” is soon to be taken to its doleful extreme.

Capulet’s rage and lamentation soon abate into sad resignation,

and his lines show how happy Juliet could have been, if only she and Romeo had been able to wed publicly and with the blessing of their families:

CAPULET

All things that we ordained festival
Turn from their office to black funeral:
Our instruments to melancholy bells,
Our wedding cheer to a sad burial feast;
Our solemn hymns to sullen dirges change,
Our bridal flowers serve for a buried corse,
And all things change them to the contrary.⁸⁾ (4.5.84-90)

News of Juliet's Death

Romeo's opening lines of this scene—"If I may trust the flattering truth of sleep / My dreams presage some joyful news at hand" (5.1.1-2)—will soon turn out to be bitterly ironical when the "ill news" comes from Verona:

ROMEO I dreamt my lady came and found me dead—
Strange dream that gives a dead man leave to think!—
And breath'd such life with kisses in my lips
That I reviv'd and was an emperor. (5.1.6-9)

René Weis points out yet another of the many parallels in the play: "The lines are premonitory of the lovers' final reunion, when Juliet's kiss ('I will kiss thy lips' 5.3.164) fails to revive Romeo" (Notes,

Romeo and Juliet, 313). In his dream, Romeo is revived by Juliet's kiss, but his trust in "the flattering truth of sleep" will later be betrayed.

When he sees his servant Balthasar, Romeo eagerly asks for the expected letter from Friar Laurence—"News from Verona! How now, Balthasar, / Dost thou not bring me letters from the Friar?" (5.1.12-13)—but what Balthasar has brought instead is the devastating news of Juliet's death. Romeo's shocked response, "Is it e'en so? Then I defy you, stars!" (5.1.24), shows yet again that Romeo believes himself to be a victim of malevolent fate. Balthazar perceives the threat in Romeo's urgent wish to go back to Verona—"Your looks are pale and wild and do import / Some misadventure" (5.1.28-29)—but Romeo denies his misgiving, which is understandable in light of the Prince's order regarding Romeo's banishment from Verona: "when he is found, that hour is his last" (3.1.196). Romeo asks again, this time sounding desperate: "Hast thou no letters to me from the Friar?" (5.1.31).

Without any knowledge of the Friar's drastic plan, Romeo resolves to die alongside his bride: "Well, Juliet, I will lie with thee tonight" (5.1.34). Romeo remembers that he has seen an apothecary in a poorly-furnished shop who looked wretched enough to willingly sell forbidden poison: "I do remember an apothecary . . . Meagre were his looks, / Sharp misery had worn him to the bones" (5.1.37; 40-41).⁹⁾ Moreover, we learn that even at the time Romeo had had a premonition of this misfortune:

ROMEO Noting this penury, to myself I said,

“And if a man did need a poison now,
Whose sale is present death in Mantua,
Here lives a caitiff wretch would sell it him.”

O, this same thought did but forerun my need. . . (5.1.49-53)

As Romeo knows, mischief is “swift / To enter in the thoughts of desperate men!” (5.1.35-36), and he goes to the apothecary and asks for “A dram of poison, such soon-speeding gear / As will disperse itself through all the veins, / That the life-weary taker may fall dead” (5.1.60-62). The apothecary initially refuses to sell such drugs because “Mantua’s law / Is death to any he that utters them” (5.1.66-67), but his poverty compels him to sell Romeo the requested poison. As if Lady Capulet’s threat of vengeance by an “unaccustom’d dram” is to be realized in this unexpected fashion, Romeo chooses to kill himself with poison:

ROMEO Come, cordial, and not poison, go with me
 To Juliet’s grave, for there must I use thee. (5.1.85-86)

For Romeo, the deadly poison has now become a cordial that will help him to achieve a blissful state of union with Juliet. In retrospect, the “doubleness” that Friar Laurence found in his medicinal plants (2.1) has cast a long and darkening shadow over the course of this play.

The Undelivered Letter

In the next scene, we learn that Friar John, to whom the crucial letter to Romeo had been entrusted, was prevented from carrying it

to Mantua. Out of fear they might have been infected with the plague, he and another Franciscan were confined in a house where they had been visiting the sick:

FRIAR JOHN . . . the searchers of the town,
Suspecting that we both were in a house
Where the infectious pestilence did reign,
Seal'd up the doors and would not let us forth,
So that my speed to Mantua there was stay'd. (5.2.8-12)

When Friar Laurence asks who then took the letter to Romeo, Friar John replies that he still has it—"here it is again"—because he could not "get a messenger to bring it thee, / So fearful were they of infection" (5.2.14-16). At this disastrous turn of events, Mercutio's curse—"A plague o' both your houses" (3.1.92, 107)—seems to resound in the background, and Friar Laurence's exclamation of woe, "Unhappy fortune!" (5.2.17), is another reminder of fatal mischance. Since Friar Laurence's plan to retrieve the waking Juliet with Romeo has been thwarted, he decides to go to the Capulets' monument alone and hide Juliet in his cell until he can summon Romeo with another letter. Alarmed at the thought of what she might face alone, Friar Laurence refers to Juliet as a "Poor living corse, clos'd in a dead man's tomb!" (5.2.29), and this gruesome image recalls Juliet's own extreme fear just before she takes the "distilling liquor" (4.3).

At the Capulet's Vault

While Paris is visiting the Capulets' vault to offer flowers to

Juliet, Romeo arrives accompanied by Balthasar. After sending Balthasar away with harsh threats to ensure his privacy, Romeo opens the tomb with an iron bar:

ROMEO Thou detestable maw, thou womb of death
 Gorg'd with the dearest morsel of the earth,
 Thus I enforce thy rotten jaws to open,
 And in despite I'll cram thee with more food. (5.3.45-48)

For Romeo, the Capulets' tomb is a monster devouring dead bodies, and he shows his determination to kill himself by referring to himself as just "more food" to feed this monster. He calls Juliet "the dearest morsel of the earth"—he had earlier referred to himself as "dull earth" (2.1.2)—and this morbid image is a clear contrast with "the fair creature," as Paris calls Juliet a few lines later (5.3.51).

Paris is outraged when he sees Romeo opening the tomb, for he blames this "vile Montague" for the deaths of both Tybalt and Juliet, so he tries to arrest Romeo as a felon who has been condemned to death for returning to Verona. When Paris ignores Romeo's pleas to leave and again tries to stop him, the two fight and Paris is slain. Romeo only realizes that it is Paris whom he has just killed when he sees the face of the fallen "gentle youth." Shocked to learn he has killed Mercutio's kinsman, Romeo is quick to respect Paris's dying wish—"Open the tomb, lay me with Juliet" (5.3.73)—for he now feels a kinship of misfortune with the dead youth:

ROMEO ... O, give me thy hand,

is malign fate, “the yoke of inauspicious stars,” and that they have always been fatally “star-cross’d.” In addition, the way in which Romeo commands his eyes to look at, arms to embrace, and lips to kiss Juliet for the last time reminds us of the moment when Juliet misunderstood the Nurse and believed Romeo to be dead:

JULIET O break, my heart. Poor bankrupt, break at once.
 To prison, eyes, ne'er look on liberty.
 Vile earth to earth resign, end motion here,
 And thou and Romeo press one heavy bier. (3.2.57-60)

Their words, spoken at the moment when each of them mistakenly thinks the other is dead, are inauspiciously symmetrical. Juliet's imagined heavy bier has become Romeo's all too-real “pallet of dim night” (5.3.107),¹¹ and, as if Juliet had already seen their future at that earlier time, Romeo kills himself beside her:

ROMEO Come, bitter conduct, come unsavoury guide,
 Thou desperate pilot now at once run on
 The dashing rocks thy seasick weary bark.
 Here's to my love! [*He drinks.*] O true apothecary,
 Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die.¹² (5.3.116-20)

Romeo addresses the poison—or “cordial,” as he approvingly called it before—as if it is the Charon to steer his ferry—the “seasick weary bark”—across the Styx, and he acknowledges the “true” apothecary for the effectiveness of this poison, which is now carrying him to

Juliet. We are reminded that Capulet had earlier described the shocked and tearful Juliet as a tempest-tossed bark that might only be saved by a sudden calm (3.5.133-37). In this vault scene, we are made painfully aware that the only calm that will bless them is that which they find in death.

Friar Laurence appears a moment too late. His combined prayer and lament—"Saint Francis be my speed. How oft tonight / Have my old feet stumbled at graves" (5.3.121-22)—provides another dark irony, for here he contradicts his earlier caution to the impatient Romeo: "Wisely and slow; they stumble that run fast" (2.3.89-90). Upon seeing Romeo and Paris lying dead, the Friar realizes he is too late: "Ah what an unkind hour / Is guilty of this lamentable chance?" (5.3.145-46). As the young lovers have felt fettered by fate, so the Friar feels betrayed by time.

And Juliet wakes—a moment too late, too. When she asks for Romeo, the Friar answers in a familiar vein:

FRIAR LAURENCE

... Lady, come from that nest
Of death, contagion, and unnatural sleep.
A greater power than we can contradict
Hath thwarted our intents. Come, come away.
Thy husband in thy bosom there lies dead. . . . (5.3.151-55)

"A greater power" joins the array of synonyms for fate, and the Friar describes the vault—"that nest / Of death, contagion, and unnatural sleep"—as if he is summarizing the adversities of his desperate plan

for them. Hearing some noise from outside, he tries to take her away, but Juliet refuses to leave Romeo's side. The Nurse did not live up to Juliet's expectations, making her feel alone, and now the formerly steadfast Friar deserts her, offering only a weak excuse: "I dare no longer stay" (5.3.160).

Juliet does not hesitate to take the poison from Romeo's hand, but the cup is empty, so she tries to kiss any remaining poison from his lips. Just as the poison had become a welcome "cordial" for Romeo, now Juliet calls the same poison "a restorative" that will convey her to Romeo:

JULIET What's here? A cup clos'd 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. [*She kisses him.*]
 Thy lips are warm! (5 3.161-166)

But there is no poison left on his lips, either. Hearing the noise of a watchman approaching from outside, Juliet quickly resorts to stabbing herself with Romeo's "happy dagger" (5.3.168). Juliet once said to Friar Laurence, when she was seeking his help to avoid marriage with Paris, "If in thy wisdom thou canst give no help, / Do thou but call my resolution wise, / And with this knife I'll help it presently" (4.1.52-54), and now at this point, when the Friar fails to remain with her, we are made to feel that Juliet was destined to kill herself in just

this way.

The watchmen, Friar Laurence, Balthazar, and Paris's page all offer their testimonies to the Prince regarding the misadventure that has compelled his presence, and Romeo's letter to his father proves the Friar's account to be true. The Prince of Verona severely reprimands Capulet and Montague for their feud and its dire results:

PRINCE See what a scourge is laid upon your hate,
 That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love;
 And I, for winking at your discords too,
 Have lost a brace of kinsmen. All are punish'd. (5.3.292-95)

The Prince makes it clear that he believes the punishment, in which he includes himself for tolerating the discord, has come from heaven. Capulet and Montague reconcile, and each vows to erect a golden statue of the other's lost child, but such gilt monuments cannot erase their guilt for the woeful sacrifices to their enmity.¹³⁾ Finally—but too late—the heavens agree: “The sun for sorrow will not show his head” (5.3.306).

* * * * *

One of Shakespeare's earliest plays, *Romeo and Juliet* is nonetheless a remarkable achievement, and Harold Bloom gives it well-deserved praise: “*Romeo and Juliet* is unmatched, in Shakespeare and in the world's literature, as a vision of an uncompromising mutual love that perishes of its own idealism and intensity. . . . the play is the

largest and most persuasive celebration of romantic love in Western literature” (*Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, 89, 90).

Romeo and Juliet is also a remarkably fast-paced play, but after we are hurriedly carried through this play marked with death from beginning to end, we are much more impressed by the love than the woe. In all, five young people—Mercutio, Tybalt, Paris, Romeo, and Juliet—die in the brief course of the play, but the luminous intensity of Romeo and Juliet’s love gleams gloriously bright above the dark bound of earthly limitation, confusion, and death. We may lament, with Lysander, at how quickly bright things may come to confusion, but in recompense we continue to be dazzled by the lingering brilliance. Romeo and Juliet’s story of woe may have had a brief two hours’ traffic upon Shakespeare’s stage, but it continues to shine out like a radiant constellation in the night sky 400 years after the author’s death.

Notes

- 1) Emphasis added in bold.
- 2) Jonathan Bate makes the claim this way: “Millions of people who have never read a word of Shakespeare instantly associate Romeo and Juliet with the idea of being in love.”
(The Genius of Shakespeare, 278)
- 3) This statement is a far cry from the lines uttered by the exaggeratedly stricken Romeo who is moping over his unrequited love for Rosaline:

ROMEO . . . I have a soul of lead

So stakes me to the ground I cannot move.

MERCUTIO You are a lover, borrow Cupid's wings

And soar with them above a common bound.

ROMEO I am too sore enpierced with his shaft

To soar with his light feathers, and so bound

I cannot bound a pitch above dull woe;

Under love's heavy burden do I sink. (1.4.15-22)

Now, in the dangerous Capulet orchard rather than the sycamore grove, he ardently lays claim to "love's light wings."

- 4) Facing the obstacle of Hermia's father's objection to their marriage, Lysander laments that "The course of true love never did run smooth" (1.1.134), and he provides several disheartening examples:

LYSANDER Or, if there were a sympathy in choice,

War, death, or sickness did lay siege to it,

Making it momentary as a sound,

Swift as a shadow, short as any dream,

Brief as the lightning in the collied night,

That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth,

And, ere a man hath power to say "Behold!"

The jaws of darkness do devour it up:

So quick bright things come to confusion.

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1.1.141-49)

- 5) Jonathan Bate points out the seriousness of the plague of 1593-94 and its effect on *Romeo and Juliet*:

When Mercutio dies with the words "A plague o' both your

houses," it is no idle oath: the play was written in the aftermath of a period when the households of many members of Shakespeare's London audience would have been struck by plague. And plague is indeed subtly woven into the plot: the reason Romeo does not get Friar Laurence's crucial letter is that Friar John is detained for fear that he might have been infected.

(*Soul of the Age*, 13)

- 6) René Weis provides a more detailed account of Phaeton:

Phaeton: the son of the Sun (Phoebus Apollo); his doomed ride in his father's chariot is recounted in *Metamorphoses* 1-2. Sensing his inexperience, the horses ran riot, causing an apocalyptic trail of scorching destruction until Zeus struck Phaeton down with a thunderbolt (Ovid, *Met.*, 2.394-5). The tale of Phaeton provides an [*sic*] bodeful undertow to the loves of Romeo and Juliet.

(Notes, *Romeo and Juliet*, 247)

- 7) There is an echo in Lear's lamentation over Cordelia's death:

LEAR And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life!
 Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life
 And thou no breath at all? O thou'lt come no more,
 Never, never, never, never, never. (*King Lear*, 5.3.304-07)

- 8) We are reminded of Gertrude's lines at Ophelia's burial:

QUEEN Sweets to the sweet. Farewell.
 I hop'd thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife:

I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,
And not have strew'd thy grave. (*Hamlet*, 5.1.241-44)

Paris also scatters flowers when he visits the Capulets' vault: "Sweet flower, with flowers thy bridal bed I strew" (5.3.12).

- 9) In Tony Tanner's view, the apothecary "looks like Death in a chanel house" (*Prefaces to Shakespeare*, 106), and this perception is fitting because when Romeo takes the poison beside Juliet's seemingly dead body, he addresses himself to Death.
- 10) Romeo describes the vault as "full of light" because to him it appears illuminated by Juliet's beauty. These lines remind us of Romeo's earlier exclamations when he first encounters Juliet: "O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright" at the Capulets' ball (1.5.44), and "What light through yonder window breaks? / It is the east and Juliet is the sun!" in the Capulets' orchard (2.2.2-3).
- 11) In this single instance, I have chosen to alter the Arden edition, preferring the Q2 "pallet of dim night" to the Q3 change to "*palace*." The Yale Shakespeare (1954), the Signet Classics Shakespeare (1998), and Oxford Shakespeare (2008) editions of the play all opt for "pallet." The current Penguin Classics edition (2015) is cautious in its choice of *palace*: "Q2 has *pallat* which might represent 'pallet bed'. Although 'pallet of dim night' is a strained phrase, it could be right" (239).

It certainly could. Because of the many verbal parallels in the play—in this case, to Juliet's earlier reference to their two bodies lying upon "one heavy bier" (3.2.60)—and the metaphoric pressure of all the death-related imagery, "pallet" is surely what Shakespeare intended here. It may be a "strained phrase," as the Penguin editor comments (as though that were anything unusual in Shakespeare's

creatively fluid use of language), but it is certainly poetically correct.

- 12) Romeo uses the same metaphor here at his death and as when he was first in love with Juliet—"I am no pilot, yet wert thou as far / As that vast shore wash'd with the farthest sea, / I should adventure for such merchandise" (2.2.82-84)—and Harold C. Goddard perceptively links the two instances:

... the poet makes Romeo revert to and round out, in parting from Juliet forever, the same metaphor he had used when she first gazed down on him from her balcony and he had tried to give expression to the scope and range of his love. How magically, placed side by side, the two passages fit together, how tragically they sum up the story.

(*The Meaning of Shakespeare*, 137)

- 13) In the light of what Romeo says about gold when he pays forty ducats to the apothecary for the poison that will end his life—"There is thy gold—worse poison to men's souls, / Doing more murder in this loathsome world / Than these poor compounds that thou mayst not sell" (5.1.80-82)—we are right to be skeptical of the propitiatory value of the stricken patriarchs' golden statues.

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