



Juliet's Desire

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As Shakespeare's young Juliet falls in love, desire catapults her from innocence towards womanhood. She has not yet been carefully taught her culture's patriarchal dictates about female behavior in courtship, sex and marriage. Juliet's unfettered expression of desire in explicit and complex language confirms her subjectivity; speaking, she is lover as well as beloved. She articulates both the boundless fluidity of a woman's love and the complex power dynamics between lovers, which incorporate aspects of submission and dominance.

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I

...Come, civil night,
Thou sober-suited matron all in black [...] (3.2.10-11)

Come, gentle night, come, loving black-browed 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. (3.2.20-24)

Juliet, a virgin not yet fourteen years old, speaks these startling words as she impatiently awaits her Romeo, hours after they have secretly wed. Part of a longer incantation to night, personified as an older female confidante, this passage condenses several themes: Juliet's child/woman status; her ease with the merger of sexual desire and aggression; and her intuition of the experience

of female orgasm. Juliet expresses loving female sexual passion in explicit and uninhibited language. She articulates both the boundless fluidity of a woman's love, and the complex power dynamics between lovers, which incorporate aspects of submission and dominance.

When Shakespeare appropriated the plot for his play from Arthur Brooke's *Romeus and Juliet*, he reduced Juliet's age by two years, from sixteen to just shy of fourteen. At thirteen, Juliet has not yet been carefully taught. She bears few marks of her culture's repressive patriarchal dictates about female behavior in courtship, sex, and marriage; desire propels her from compliant obedience into agency and subjectivity.

Juliet's instruction in proper conduct for marriageable young women begins with her first appearance on stage (Act 1, Scene 3). Lady Capulet, ever formal in the performance of her parental duties, summons her daughter to begin that indoctrination just hours before Juliet and Romeo fall in love. Juliet enters and obediently addresses her mother, "Madam, I am here. What is your will?" (1.3. 7). The voluble Nurse interrupts to reminisce about Juliet's early life. Her ramblings reveal most of what we learn about Juliet's upbringing.

We learn that Nurse lost her own baby just before Juliet's birth, that she suckled Juliet, and that she and her now deceased husband helped raise the child, who was weaned late, at age 3, on the day of an earthquake. The day before, Nurse recalls, Juliet fell and cut her forehead. Her husband picked up the child and comforted her:

'Yea,' quoth he, dost thou fall upon thy face?
Thou wilt fall backward when thou hast more wit,
Wilt thou not, Jule?' And by my holidam,
The pretty wretch left crying and said 'Ay'.
To see now how a jest shall come about! (1.3.42-46)

Nurse delightedly repeats four times that Juliet said "Ay" to the idea of "falling backwards." Nurse's story reveals the pleasurable view of sexuality that she and her husband imparted to young Juliet. She concludes, "An I might live to see thee married once/ I have my wish" (1.3.62-63).

Unlike many of Shakespeare's young heroines, Juliet has no close female peers with whom to discuss love and courtship. (Rosalind has Celia, Beatrice has Hero, Portia has Nerissa, Desdemona has Emilia, and Hermia and Helena have each other.) Nurse has been her singular companion and confidante. Nurse's affectionate names for Juliet ("lamb" and "ladybird"[1.3.3]), the details of the loss of her own baby and Juliet's late weaning imply that she has been a loving surrogate mother as well.

When Lady Capulet finally gains control over Nurse's monologue she launches her own agenda: "Tell me, daughter Juliet/ How stands your dispositions to be married?" (1.3.65-66). Juliet responds, "It is an honour that I dream not of" (1.3.67). Her mother quickly prompts her to "think of marriage

now” (1.3.70), disclosing that “the valiant Paris seeks you for his love”(1.3.75). Lady Capulet continues:

What say you, can you love the gentleman?
This night you shall behold him at our feast.
Read o’er the volume of young Paris’ face. (1.3.80-82)

This precious book of love, this unbound lover,
To beautify him only lacks a cover.
The fish lives in the sea, and ‘tis much pride
For fair without the fair within to hide.
That book in many’s eyes doth share the glory
That in gold clasps locks in the golden story.
So shall you share all that he doth possess,
By having him, making yourself no less. (1.3.88-95)

Lady Capulet directs Juliet to read Paris, “this precious book of love,” which Juliet will adorn as a cover, her “gold clasps” locking in “the golden story.” Juliet, the “fair without” will enhance Paris “the fair within.” In Lady Capulet’s view, female beauty both accessorizes and ensnares the substantive content of men. Her conclusion, “So shall you share all that he doth possess/By having him, making yourself no less”, emphasizes that marriage is, above all, a financial transaction that will increase Juliet’s status.

Lady Capulet then restates the question, “Speak briefly, can you like of Paris’ love?” (1.3.97) to which Juliet carefully replies,

I’ll look to like, if looking liking move,
But no more deep will I endart mine eye
Than your consent gives strength to make it fly. (1.3.98-100)

In her first words to her mother, “What is your will?”(1.3.7), Juliet models the filial obedience that is expected. Here, her promise that her love will align with parental consent appears to reinforce the portrait of a docile and naïve child, one who has not yet dreamt of marriage and does not imagine herself a woman. However, Juliet’s metaphor “no more deep will I endart mine eye,” invokes both the aggressive penetration of Cupid’s arrow and her awareness of the penetrating power of her glance. Perhaps Juliet already envisions that her own desire may not comply with her mother’s instructions.

Nurse has the final word in this scene. While Lady Capulet has characterized marriage as economic self-advancement, bawdy Nurse delightedly urges Juliet to find sexual bliss, “Go, girl, seek happy nights to happy days” (1.3.98-100).

Shakespeare did not appropriate Act 1, Scene 3 from the plot of Brooke's poem; it is strictly the playwright's invention. He takes pains in this scene to establish that Juliet is innocent of cultural influence about courtship.

Juliet does not read the book of County Paris, of course. Just hours later, she falls in love with Romeo. The *coup de foudre* which strikes her ignites desire not fettered by the conventions society imposes on women. Indeed, Juliet's very first interaction with Romeo is marked by a departure from established custom. She and Romeo, mutually smitten, together construct a sonnet, "If I profane with my unworthiest hand..." (1.5.92-106). Romeo leads with eight lines, and Juliet responds with six. The sonnet, traditionally a genre in which an unrequited male suitor petitions an unobtainable female, becomes here a shared poetic creation ending in a mutually electric kiss.

By conceiving Juliet as a desiring young woman, rather than merely a desirable object, Shakespeare deliberately upends the tradition of Petrarchan romance. Juliet speaks her desire; with her language, she creates her subjectivity. As a subject rather than merely an object, she defies the patriarchal expectation embedded in her mother's instruction on female behavior.

Desire catapults Juliet towards womanhood. The previously childlike Juliet becomes instantly canny, and sends Nurse to identify her already beloved stranger. She says, in soliloquy, "If he be married/ My grave is like to be my wedding bed" (1.5.133-134). Even though she is dismayed to learn that Romeo is a Montague, and scion of her family's despised enemy, Juliet does not falter in the certainty of her love:

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. (1.5.137-140)

Love and hate are inextricable. Centuries before psychoanalysts recognized that these feelings are inescapably bound to each other, Shakespeare understood that sexual love is inseparable from aggression. Juliet does not let family enmity interfere with her choice of lover. In fact, the excitement generated by the transgression of loving an enemy energizes her desire.

Mere hours after their first encounter, Juliet and Romeo meet again. Romeo has eluded his male comrades and leapt the wall into the Capulet orchard. Outside on the street, his close friend Mercutio attempts to conjure Romeo (at the outset of a witty and misogynist rant about Romeo's unresponsive love object Rosaline):

Romeo, humours, madman, passion, lover
Appear though in the likeness of a sigh
Speak but one rhyme and I am satisfied

Cry but ‘Ay me’... (2.1.7-10)

Romeo, however, is contemplating Juliet, who has appeared on the balcony; unheard, he rhapsodizes about his love for her. Unaware of Romeo’s proximity, Juliet sighs “Ay me” (2.2.24). Her first words appropriate the melancholic lover’s cry that Mercutio has just sought from Romeo. Romeo adoringly states the obvious: “She speaks” (2.2.25). His statement underlines Shakespeare’s departure from the conventional sonnet dynamic, where the female beloved, the object of adoration, is a mute recipient. Speaking, Juliet confirms her subjectivity. Like Romeo, she is lover as well as beloved.

In a literal metaphor of penetration, Romeo surmounts the walls of her parents’ enclosed orchard in search of his “cloistered” virgin. Juliet integrates both submission and dominance in her relationship and love language with Romeo. She addresses him from the balcony, on top, and he speaks from below; she orchestrates their meeting, which is twice interrupted by Nurse’s calls. Each brief separation from Romeo seems to strengthen Juliet’s resolve to possess him, and her language becomes increasingly more directive.

Just before their first separation, Juliet anxiously notes that their “contract” seems “too rash, too unadvised, too sudden” (2.2.117) and says good night. When Romeo then asks her for “th’exchange of thy love’s faithful vow for mine” (2.2.127), Juliet replies “I gave thee mine before thou didst request it” (2.2.128), and continues, “My bounty is as boundless as the sea...” (2.2.133).

Her awareness of her love and desire deepens and expands as she speaks her feelings to him. Interrupted by Nurse’s call within, she leaves, but quickly returns. With unembarrassed intention, Juliet once more upends convention, proposing to Romeo that they marry the next day. She then vows “...all my fortunes at thy foot I’ll lay,/And follow thee my lord throughout the world” (2.2.147-148).

Following this overtly submissive pledge, Juliet is called offstage by Nurse. She again says goodnight to Romeo and exits, but returns a moment later and boldly summons him:

Hist, Romeo, hist! O, for a falconer’s voice,
To lure this tassel-gentle back again--
Bondage is hoarse and may not speak aloud,
Else would I tear the cave where Echo lies
And make her airy tongue more hoarse than mine
With repetition of my ‘Romeo’. (2.2.158-163)

Juliet imagines herself a falconer calling Romeo, her male peregrine falcon, back to her, her voice luring and controlling this soaring and powerful creature. As she envisions herself growing hoarse with this effort, she switches to a complex image of her own bondage, enthralled by love as she forces herself and Echo to repeat Romeo’s name.

Romeo, mirroring her avian metaphor of dominance, then calls Juliet “My nyas,” (a fledgling hawk) (2.2.168). Juliet playfully responds with a consummate metaphor of dominance:

...I would have thee gone,
And yet no farther than a wanton’s bird,
That lets it hop a little from his hand,
Like a poor prisoner in his twisted gyves,
And with a silken thread plucks it back again,
So loving-jealous of his liberty.

Romeo

I would I were thy bird.

Juliet

Sweet, so would I,
Yet I should kill thee with much cherishing. (2.2.176-184)

Juliet imagines keeping Romeo on a silken thread, perhaps a fellow prisoner confined in her parents’ house. Jealous of his male liberty, coming and going as he chooses, she identifies herself here as a “wanton,” a naughty child. She has captured Romeo; the noble bird of prey is now downsized to a pet bird. And Romeo is a ready partner to her fantasy, “I would I were thy bird” (2.2.182). With each reappearance on the balcony, Juliet’s position in their relationship becomes more dominant. However, in their loving mutuality, Juliet and Romeo ensure that the aggression incorporated in their power dynamics of dominance and submission does not endanger, but rather enlivens, their relationship.

The following day, after their marriage, Juliet impatiently awaits night, when Romeo will climb, hidden by darkness, to her bedroom. Her ardent soliloquy takes the form of an *epithalamium*, a song traditionally sung to the bride before the consummation of marriage.¹ Juliet opens the scene with the famous lines “Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds/towards Phoebus’ lodging” (3.2.1-2), and continues:

...Come, civil night,
Thou sober-suited matron all in black,
And learn me how to lose a winning match,
Played for a pair of stainless maidenhoods.
Hood my unmanned blood, bating in my cheeks,
With thy black mantle, till strange love grow bold,
Think true love acted simple modesty.
Come night, come Romeo, come thou day in night,
For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night

¹ Gary McCown identified this soliloquy as an *epithalamium* in 1976.

Whiter than new snow upon a raven's back.
Come, gentle night, come loving black-browed 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.....(3.2.10-25)

The mutuality and ease with aggression expressed in the orchard scene are here echoed in Juliet's request that night, whom she identifies as a female, "learn me how to lose a winning match/Played for a pair of stainless maidenhoods." If sex is a physical contest in which she will lose her maidenhead, Romeo will lose his virginity as well; and both lovers will win.

Juliet imagines herself as a bird of prey hooded before its release into flight. She waits for Romeo, male "day," to penetrate her, female "night." In a repeated mantra to "night," Juliet beckons her "knight" Romeo, with both command and submission fused in this incantation. (The scene ends with Juliet asking Nurse to "give this ring to my true knight"[3.2.142]).

Juliet's address to night, "...when I shall die/ Take him and cut him out in little stars" represents a complex condensation of thoughts and impulses; most startling is the aggressive image of cutting Romeo into stars. The harshness of this command is mitigated by its touching innocence: children cut paper into stars. The concluding lines of Juliet's soliloquy reinforce this vestige of her youth:

...So tedious is this day
As is the night before some festival
To an impatient child that hath new robes
And may not wear them. (3.2.28-31)

The notion that Romeo cut into little stars will so enhance the heavens that all the world will be in love with night is childlike in its exuberance. However, the juxtaposition of the prefatory instruction "when I shall die" complicates its meaning. This phrase is, in part, a portent of Juliet's death, but Shakespeare's audiences were also familiar with "dying" as a slang metaphor for orgasm. Here, in bursts of light, she imagines the exhilaration and expansiveness of a woman's sexual climax. Juliet's vision that her orgasm will coincide with Romeo being cut into stars anticipates an explosive merger with her lover which contains simultaneously both desire and aggression. Juliet will reimagine this potent union in her final words and action. Her "O happy dagger! This is thy sheath; there rust and let me die" (5.3.169-170) welcomes Romeo's phallic dagger in a stunning union of love and death.

Juliet's comfort with the integration of sexual desire and aggression is only one aspect of her desire's fluidity. She also experiences desire as an exuberant,

creative force that connects her to Romeo and to the world. As a child of three, she said “Ay” to the prospect of sexual experience. In the orchard with Romeo, she says:

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. (2.2.133-135)

Later, in Friar Laurence’s cell, just before they marry, she asserts:

They are but beggars that can count their worth,
But my true love is grown to such excess,
I cannot sum up sum of half my wealth. (2.6.32-34)

“My true love is grown to such excess,” a line which recalls Nurse’s jest in Act 1 that “women grow by men” (1.3.96), speaks to the intersection of abundance and maternalism. The boundlessness of the sea, a teeming source of life, also evokes the womb of a pregnant woman. Juliet’s insistence that her love for Romeo is infinite and self-replenishing connects her love with the infinity of the life cycle. Juliet’s claim that she “cannot sum up sum of half my wealth” declares her enrichment by the agency and power of the desire she brings to the marriage. Here she refutes her mother’s suggestion: “so shall you share all that he doth possess/By having him, making yourself no less” (1.3.94-95).

II

Female desire, like the sea, presents men with both bounty and peril. Female desire also triggers misogyny, a prominent theme throughout Shakespeare’s plays. A brief detour into the developmental origins of misogyny may be helpful here. Robert Stoller’s work on gender identity formation and Nancy Chodorow’s text *The Reproduction of Mothering* are relevant to this discussion. (Although traditional gender roles are being redefined, the assumption here will be that mothers and women are still the primary caretakers of most babies and young children.)

Early experiences of emotional intimacy and merger are asymmetrical with respect to gender. Baby girls can develop a sense of female self without interrupting an early identification with the mother. Baby boys, however, must disavow identification with the mother to develop a masculine sense of self. In most cultures male selfhood requires by age two or three a partial rupture in their earliest connection, a difficult task which can arouse fears of maternal abandonment. Stoller rightly refers to masculinity as “an achievement” (1985, p.18). Stoller also describes a related phenomenon, male “symbiosis anxiety,” i.e., fear of regression into a symbiotic reunion with the mother. Males may

attempt to assist this difficult separation by adopting defenses that include devaluation of women, and disavowal of intimacy. Even loving unions with women may trigger fears of regression; to defend against symbiosis anxiety men may display active hostility towards women.

Misogynist attitudes can include a fear of or contempt for female desire, which males often blame for provoking male lust. The conspicuous reinforcement of masculinity at the expense of women anchors the core of patriarchal cultures.

Women, too, participate in this perpetuation of male power, accepting and internalizing the misogyny that governs their lives. Women become accommodating defenders of their own subjugation, transmitting this attitude to other women and their own daughters. When Lady Capulet attempts to persuade Juliet that she will share Paris' glory by being the "gold clasps" to lock in "the golden story," she exposes her complicity in devaluing her own sex. Juliet's childhood, distanced from her birth mother, reared on affection from the bawdy and overtly sexual Nurse, protects her from internalizing this devaluation.

Later, in Act 3 Scene 5, Lady Capulet presents Juliet with the parental plan that she marry Paris; Juliet, horrified, initially rejects this plan. When mother and daughter are joined by Capulet, who asks about Juliet's response, Lady Capulet declares "I would the fool were married to her grave" (3.5.140). In the classic Oedipal situation, the child unconsciously wishes to marry the parent of the opposite sex and harbors a death wish towards the same-sex parent. Triangular Oedipal constellations can also generate hostility from parent to child; maternal competition with daughters, expressed here in Lady Capulet's murderous rage, stokes her insistence on filial compliance with patriarchal expectations.

Misogyny in *Romeo and Juliet* is diffused throughout the play. The play opens with Capulet's man Samson boasting about attacking the Montague men and sexually assaulting the Montague maids. When we first encounter Romeo, his emotional connections are with a male homosocial group, notably Benvolio and Mercutio. Mercutio's misogyny is most on display; colored by his lewd wit, it imbues his Queen Mab speech. In Romeo's absence, Mercutio jests obscenely about Rosaline, "O, Romeo, that she were, O.../An open-arse, thou a poperin pear!" (2.1.37-38). (The misogyny apparent in this line is complicated by its homoerotic energies, which Jonathan Goldberg deftly analyzes. [Goldberg, p.229].)

Romeo himself remains almost impervious to the misogynist attitudes of his male comrades. He is steadfast in his love for Juliet both before and after its consummation. Only grief and his sense of responsibility for Mercutio's mortal wound fuel Romeo's momentary regression towards misogyny. He laments:

...O sweet Juliet,
Thy beauty hath made me effeminate
And in my temper softened valour's steel! (3.1.115-117)

Romeo's reaction to Mercutio's death shifts the play's trajectory from comic to tragic. Declaring "fire-eyed fury be my conduct now" (3.1.126), Romeo seizes his sword and fatally stabs Juliet's cousin Tybalt.

With the exception of Romeo's brief lapse, and perhaps the Friar's bad advice, Juliet is not an overt target of misogyny. In this respect, she escapes the abuse directed towards many of Shakespeare's female characters (e.g., Hero, Ophelia, Desdemona, Isabella, Cleopatra). Juliet expresses desire in more explicit and complex language than any other Shakespearean heroine. Her voice emerges unconstricted by the education in sexual conformity imposed on women in her culture. But the lovers' intense sexual passion, prohibited by their families, transgresses the patriarchal social order.

Friar Laurence warns Romeo just before his marriage: "These violent delights have violent ends/And in their triumph die..." (2.6.9-10). Faced with parental insistence that she marry Paris, Juliet seeks Nurse's counsel. Even Nurse, who has endorsed the pleasure of sexuality, neither understands nor can conceive of the power of Juliet's passionate desire. Pragmatism is at the heart of Nurse's advice to marry Paris: he is wealthy, handsome, and at hand. Juliet, done forever with Nurse, then seeks guidance from the Friar. She tells him she will kill herself with the knife she carries or leap from the battlements of a tower rather than marry Paris. The Friar also fails Juliet. He gives her a potion to drink to simulate death and a plan for Romeo to rescue her when she awakens in the family tomb. The enforced passivity of this gruesome solution, borrowed from Brooke, seems ill-suited for Shakespeare's lively and assertive heroine, whom one could imagine galloping apace to meet her husband.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, the lovers' deaths are a punishment for their violation of sexual conventions. Misogyny contributes to the tragic outcome here. Passionate sexual love defies cultural norms and courts death.

III

Edward Snow's fine 1985 paper "Language and Sexual Difference in *Romeo and Juliet*" illuminates the differences in the ways that Romeo and Juliet articulate their desire:

...the language of *Romeo and Juliet* is most intricately concerned not with the opposition between passion and the social order but with the difference between the sexes: ...its subtler affirmations have to do not with romantic love but female ontology. (Snow, p.170)

Snow sees Juliet as “the locus of affirmative energies that can’t be contained within a tragic frame of reference” (Snow, p. 173), and he emphasizes the boundlessness and timelessness of her desire. He observes that she “manages to be both subject and object in love” (Snow, p. 173), but he does not comment on the aggression and sexual dominance that infuse her language.

Juliet embodies a candid and intimate portrait of the female experience of love. What “she speaks” is certainly concerned with “the opposition between passion and the social order” (Snow, p. 170). Her female ontology-- its articulation of desire, subjectivity and powerful agency-- directly threatens the status quo of the patriarchal systems that seek, by definition, to contain women and their desire.

Juliet’s threat may be unfamiliar to those who were raised on cinematic Juliets, perhaps because films most often substantially compress Shakespeare’s text. In arguably the most influential modern-day production of *Romeo and Juliet* – the iconic 1968 Franco Zeffirelli film, a box office success which is still a standard in high school and college curricula--Juliet’s lines have been heavily edited, with the result that her persona is significantly diminished. In the role of Juliet, fifteen-year-old Olivia Hussey ably projects innocence, tenderness, and passion, but the actress is denied access to Juliet’s more complex aspects. Deleted in Zeffirelli’s vision of Juliet are her displays of power and independence, her agency and subjectivity: Juliet’s lines in 2.2, the orchard scene, where she imagines herself controlling Romeo and tethering him to her, and the entirety of her fervent soliloquy to night in 3.2. These cuts remove the aggression, as well as most of the complex and powerful language, from Juliet’s expressions of desire. Denied these feelings, Zeffirelli’s Juliet sparkles, but does not startle or challenge. She is more beloved than lover.

Shakespeare’s Juliet, however, continues to burn bright in her timeless, youthful passion. Her unfettered articulation of female desire is memorialized in the soaring language given her by her creator; in his complete text, Juliet’s bounty remains boundless.

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