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DEFYING THE STARS: TRAGIC LOVE AS THE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM IN ROMEO AND JULIET

Paul A. Kottman

For freedom is this: to be with oneself in the other.
—G. W. F. Hegel

Is it e’en so? Then I defy you, stars!
—Romeo and Juliet, 5.1.24

Shakespeare’s ROMEO AND JULIET (1592) is arguably “the preeminent document of love in the West.” Like no other work, the play heightens our desire for a tragic love story that we still seek in many forms—in novellas, novels, films, musicals, and operas. There are familiar explanations for Shakespeare’s love tragedy. Some regard Shakespeare’s lovers as victims of bad timing or accidental misfortune; others maintain that Romeo and Juliet are in the throes of young love and come to ruin because of their intemperance. But because these accounts reduce the action to a particular circumstance, they do not adequately explain the myth’s “universal” appeal.

The most common interpretation of the myth is that it exposes a conflict between the lovers’ individual desires and the reigning demands of family, civic, and social norms in relation to which those desires are formed. In this sense, ROMEO AND JULIET is a paradigm of modern tragedy, which in Hegel’s definition of Shakespearean drama “takes for its proper subject matter . . . the subjective inner life of the character who is not, as in classical tragedy, a purely individual


embodiment of ethical powers.” Even the familiar interpretation of the lovers’ fates as a kind of Liebestod, by which “their deaths celebrate the strength and intensity of their devotion to one another,” offers a version of this general conflict. Because the lovers’ desires cannot be reconciled to the life of the family or society from which they spring, they must extinguish themselves. Nothing vindicates a society’s demands so much as the lovers’ self-destruction.

The contours of this critical paradigm have been tracked in many different ways. But the formal structure of this dialectical tension between the lovers’ individual desires, on the one hand, and some particular form of social, familial, or civic life, on the other, remains the critical paradigm that frames our understanding of Romeo and Juliet. Feminist scholars Coppélia Kahn and Janet Adelman, as well as their critic Jonathan Goldberg, argue that the idealization of “love” in Shakespeare’s play is an ideological construct (patriarchal, heterosexist, homosocial, and so forth) and hence “social” through and through. “Love” is not a transcendent state of otherworldly bliss but a worldly predicament; sexual identities entail sociohistorical conditions of possibility; social forms and sexual identities are not static but transformable and subject to critique and revision at the level of social practice. However, granting all of this does nothing to displace the critical-interpretive paradigm at issue here, which sees individual desires as irreducible to the social norms by which they are shaped.

3 Hegel mentions Romeo and Juliet alongside Hamlet as exemplary in this regard, although he also describes Romeo and Juliet as “the tragic transience of so beautiful a love which is shattered by the crazy calculations of a noble and well-meaning cleverness.” See G. W. F. Hegel, “Dramatic Poetry,” in Philosophers on Shakespeare, ed. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), 73, 80–81.


5 Here we could compare Shakespeare’s play to the “love-suicide” dramas of Japanese playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1725), where the love affair conflicts with social or familial duties, economic interests, or obligations (“giri” in Japanese). Or we might think of Denis de Rougement’s well-known thesis that passionate love is a heretically nihilistic opposition to Christian love or feudal marriage. “Unawares and in spite of themselves,” writes De Rougement in a classic formulation, “the lovers have never had but one desire—the desire for death!” See Love in the Western World (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), 46.

6 Dympna Callaghan observes “a certain formation of desiring subjectivity attendant upon Protestant and especially Puritan ideologies of marriage and the family required by, or at least very conducive to the emergent economic formation of, capitalism.” Although Callaghan’s approach is meant to be narrowly historicist, her essay nevertheless makes clear, in its invocation of emergent forms of capitalism, how this formation of desire continues throughout cultural transformations in the modern era. See “The Ideology of Romantic Love: The Case of Romeo and Juliet,” in Romeo and Juliet: Contemporary Critical Essays, ed. R. S. White (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 85–115, esp. 85.

7 Goldberg’s debate with Kahn and Adelman over the way in which “love” is idealized or “ideologized” in their interpretations of Romeo and Juliet only redoubles the search for, and presupposition of, a critical edge in “forbidden desires” with respect to the social. We see this in the
Taking an even broader view, we can see why this interpretative paradigm continues to have such explanatory force. After all, a rupture between the desires of individuals and prevailing societal norms, or the failure of duty-bound forms of life to satisfy individuals, forms the core of philosophical accounts of modern subjectivity. In Shakespeare's influence on Freud (or Freud's influence on our view of Shakespeare), recall a familiar passage from *Civilization and Its Discontents*: “On the one hand, love comes into opposition to the interests of civilization; on the other, civilization threatens love with substantial restrictions.” Stated more historically, a growing rift between traditional societies and individual desires—the so-called “world alienation” experienced by human beings in the wake of scientific, economic, and philosophical modernity and the fundamental processes “as the result of which man . . . lost his place in the world”—is by now a familiar trope in modern intellectual history.

My goal is not to spirit us away to a bird's-eye view of modernity, but to call to mind the stakes implied by our paradigmatic understanding of *Romeo and Juliet*. We see our loves, aims, and desires as dialectically conditioned by, but never fully reconciled to, whatever our households, workplaces, and communal bonds demand of us. *Romeo and Juliet* raises this dialectical tension between individual subjects and social “reality” to a fever pitch—unto death. And the play does so, unforgettably, by showing sexual love to be the proper horizon of this conflict, searing our vision of love to our self-awareness as modern subjects, our struggles for freedom and self-realization. This, I think, accounts for much of the play's critical reception, as well as its popular appeal, its continuing urgency and relevance.

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8 To cite a recent example, in his new book Stephen Greenblatt writes, “Above all, perhaps, it is Shakespeare's lovers who encounter again and again the boundaries that society or nature sets to the most exalted and seemingly unconfined passions . . . the peculiar magic of Shakespeare's comedies is that love's preciousness and intensity are not diminished by such exposure to limits but rather enhanced.” See *Shakespeare's Freedom* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2010), 3.


However, this interpretive paradigm leaves some troubling questions about the play unresolved. The lovers' suicides, for a start, still call to be understood (“Go hence and have more talk of these sad things” [5.3.306]). Nor will a retrospective account of the events convince us that their “stol’n marriage day” (l. 232) led necessarily to Romeo's banishment, Juliet's betrothal, the magic potion, and the apothecary, much less to the double suicide. The narrative of events offered by the Friar (ll. 228–68) is just that: a summation of disjointed facts and accidents, not a tragic mythos of consequential actions, reversals, and recognitions.

Moreover, we have borne witness to what the Friar's objective recounting has missed. We heard the balcony scene and the aubade, watched the lovers' happiness and their self-destruction. We know full well what the Friar's account ignores—practically everything that matters to us! Likewise, we recognize that the objective outcome—civic peace—stands removed from the heart of our real dramatic investment. We did not really care whether Capulet and Montague could be reconciled to one another; indeed, for Capulet and Montague the “glooming peace this morning with it brings” (l. 304) is not worth the price. Objectively and affectively, it is Romeo's and Juliet's sorrow and joy that we have followed and that we continue to talk about. “For never was a story of more woe / Than this of Juliet and her Romeo” (ll. 308–9). The connection between their woe and the social outcome (peace between the families) still appears to us strained, unsatisfying, unconvincing, “Poor sacrifices of our enmity” (l. 303). In short, it turns out that our paradigmatic interpretation of the myth—a dialectical tension between the lovers' desires and the demands of society or nature—cannot plausibly account for the play’s outcome or the lovers’ own actions, all of which strain this dialectic past its breaking point.

In his Lectures on Fine Art, Hegel sensed that Shakespeare inaugurated something like a nondialectical conception of tragedy. Here is Hegel voicing his anxiety about Shakespearean drama: “Since now it is not the substantial element in these spheres [of family, state, church, and so on] which engrosses the interest of individuals, their aims are broadly and variously particularized and in such detail that what is truly substantial can often glimmer through them in only a very dim way.” In short, the conundrum that Shakespearean drama posed to Hegel is the one I just noted. In Shakespeare's drama, the tethering between individual actions and the demands of culture or the claims of nature slackens to a point at which the dialectic can no longer tighten it.

11 Hegel's discussion of Shakespeare comes at the very end of a lengthy set of lectures on “fine art,” as if he were somewhat flummoxed by the works that he seems to have regarded as the culmination of human artistic production (“Dramatic Poetry,” 73). For a longer discussion of Shakespeare in the context of Hegel's reflections on art, see my “The Charm Dissolves Apace: Shakespeare and the Self-dissolution of Drama,” in Shakespeare and Continental Philosophy, ed. Jennifer Bates (Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming).
Modern philosophers since Schelling and Hegel, from Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger to Adorno and Benjamin, have understood the “tragic” to be essential to understanding the fate of modern subjectivity. But while Shakespearean drama is an important object of their attention, it is primarily Attic tragedy (above all, that of Sophocles) that furnishes the model for philosophy’s tragic dialectics. Remarkably, our interpretation of ourselves as modern subjects, like our paradigmatic interpretation of Romeo and Juliet, takes root in a philosophical tradition whose primary model of the “tragic” is a dialectical tension between social duties, not sexual love. It is Sophoclean, not Shakespearean.

In the present essay, my aim is to replace our paradigmatic interpretation of Romeo and Juliet with a different understanding of love as the struggle for freedom and to present Shakespeare’s drama as a properly modern vision of our “tragic” subjectivity. My purpose is not to use Romeo and Juliet as a pretext for a philosophical argument that could be mustered without reference to the play, but to present Shakespeare’s play as the preeminent dramatization of our modern subjectivity as “tragic lovers”—to explain what we are doing when we enact Romeo and Juliet rather than, say, Antigone. I will offer a fuller explanation of elements of Romeo and Juliet that have eluded our understanding, such as the medicinal remedy and the suicides. I will also illuminate how a new interpretation of the play yields a deeper understanding of our struggle for freedom and self-realization as lovers. Contesting the notion that the “tragic” core of our modern subjectivity is rooted in a conflict between individual desires and the reigning demands of family, civic, and social norms shaping those desires, I contend that Shakespeare’s play shows how Romeo and Juliet are formed as subjects through acts of mutual self-recognition that mute such conflicts. Such acts constitute a love affair.

Romeo and Juliet is the drama of a struggle for individual freedom and self-realization, and this drama has a tragic structure. However, the tragic core of our self-realization springs not from our personal struggles with external social or natural necessities but from the dawning realization that nothing, not even mortality, separates or individuates us absolutely. This awakening leads Romeo and Juliet to the realization that, if they are to claim their lives as their own, they

12 For more on Shakespeare’s importance to the German “philosophy of the tragic,” see Paul A. Kottman, “Introduction,” in Philosophers on Shakespeare, 1–17. For an excellent overview of the “tragic” as dialectic in German philosophy, see Peter Szondi, An Essay on the Tragic (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002).

13 Attic writers did not take sexual love as a properly tragic predicament. According to Denis de Rougement, for the Greeks, “love raises problems only if it enters into conflict with moral duty. It is not a problem in itself. One may kill out of jealousy, or because one’s (social) pride is wounded, but one cannot die of love (the metaphor itself is ridiculed).” See Love Declared: Essays on the Myths of Love (New York: Pantheon, 1963), 12.
must somehow actualize their separateness for themselves, through one another. Their love affair is not the story of two individuals whose desire to be together is thwarted by “A greater power than we can contradict” (5.3.153). Rather, it is the story of two individuals who actively claim their separate individuality, their own freedom, in the only way that they can—through one another. Their love affair demonstrates that their separateness or individuation is not an imposed, external necessity, but the operation of their freedom and self-realization. To show this, they will stake their lives.

II

We’ll not carry coals.
—1.1.1

The men of two families prepare to fight to the death. “Naked” weapons on display, each seethes for domination over the other, “for the weakest goes to the wall” (1.1.33, 12–13). Because there is no clear distinction between master and servant, even those who are ostensibly servants fight for mastery. Since each side recognizes the other as gripped by the same desire, a fight is in the air.

But what does each wish to gain in the fight? Why the need for a fight at all? We can quickly dismiss a traditional answer to these questions—that the men fight because they happen to be Capulets or Montagues, as if they were obliged to do so by an “ancient grudge” (Prologue, l. 3) between their respective houses.14 Because such grudges merely offer occasions for quarreling, they cannot serve as the proper aim of the fight.15

The brawl in Romeo and Juliet gives each the chance to prove his manhood.16 But what is meant by “manhood” is not some desired social standing, masculine virtue, or “manliness,” like the “man at arms” in Castiglione’s Book of the Courtier. Such a standing may be desirable in certain contexts and obtained in some circumstances by prevailing in violent conflict. However, because violent conflict

14 This is why West Side Story is much less gripping than its Shakespearean source. There, the fight to the death is essential to a broader ethnic tribal struggle or gang war, in which the lovers are caught up and by which they are defeated. Hence, Tony and Maria’s fate is not “tragic,” but merely wretched, regrettable, and pathetic—as if the lovers merely had the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time among the wrong people.

15 As Gregory and Sampson’s opening exchange makes clear, no one fights on behalf of his “house” or for glory and honor. “The quarrel is between our masters and us their men / ’Tis all one” (1.1.18–19). Mercutio playfully acknowledges this in his and Benvolio’s desire to quarrel, no matter the reason or occasion: “Why, thou wilt quarrel with a man that hath a hair more or a hair less in his beard than thou hast” (3.1.1–27, esp. ll. 16–18).

16 There is no use denying that a display of sexual prowess motivates the men (“I will push Montague’s men from the wall, and thrust his maids to the wall” [1.1.15–17]). But “sexual prowess” is not only a form of social prestige but also a struggle for self-realization.
is not absolutely necessary for the acquisition of such a standing—if anything, in Shakespeare’s Verona, one’s civic status appears to depend upon keeping the peace—the desire to be recognized by others as “manly” (or as a “Montague” or a “Capulet”) does not explain the necessity of a fight to the death. And it is a fight to the death that we must explain; something more elemental is at stake.

_I risk my life in a battle to the death—say the men—not for prestige, or as an act of tribal duty or animal aggression; but rather to show that the desire to stay alive (mere instinct) does not drive me absolutely (“Draw if you be men” [1.1.59])._

“I” am more than my desire to live. My bodily vitality is not the highest value for me; biological life is not a higher “good” by which my existence is measured. I take measure of my own life by risking it.

If I cannot stake this claim, then no social standing or recognition of my manhood can be meaningful for me.\(^{17}\)

This is the atmosphere in which Tybalt enters. Hating the very word “peace,” he announces what is truly at stake: independence achieved through the destruction of the other (“‘Turn thee, Benvolio, look upon thy death” [l. 64]). But Tybalt’s dream of independence is shattered as soon as it is announced. He is not defeated by his foe, the Montagues, but by the citizens of Verona, who oppose not the quarreling men but “independent” quarreling as such (“Rebellious subjects, enemies to peace” [l. 79]). Forced to “Throw” their “mistemper’d weapons to the ground” before the Prince, Tybalt and the others are thrown back into civic life (l. 85).\(^{18}\) By quarreling, the men would only bring about their own deaths. “If ever you disturb our streets again / Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace” (ll. 94–95). Where life-and-death battles lead to the immediate death for all combatants, the very meaning of the struggle is lost.\(^{19}\) Thus, Verona

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\(^{17}\) This is exactly how Hegel describes the motivation for the life-and-death struggle; see G. W. F. Hegel, _The Phenomenology of Spirit_, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 114 (paragraph 187).

\(^{18}\) As Northrop Frye notes, “In view of Tudor policy and Queen Elizabeth’s personal dislike of duels and brawling, [Shakespeare’s] play would have no trouble with the censor.” _Northrop Frye on Shakespeare_ (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985), 15. In an intriguing essay called “The Duel Dies,” Kwame Anthony Appiah explores the demise of “dueling” as a social practice through which honor and standing are bestowed. We might think of the citizens’ uprising in _Romeo and Juliet_ as staging this same demise. See _The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen_ (New York: Norton, 2010), 1–52.

\(^{19}\) Of course, one might still seek to make a life “meaningful” by fighting to the death, even when death is the certain outcome. This is what happens in Macbeth’s final struggle. Having lost all hope of leaving the battle alive, he refuses both suicide and surrender: “Lay on, Macduff / And damned be him that first cries ‘Hold, enough!’” (Macbeth, 5.8.33–34). But as Shakespeare’s first audiences perhaps remembered better than we do, on display here is merely the nobility of the highest animals who struggle even when doomed by their fetters. “They have tied me to the stake; I cannot fly, / But bearlike I must fight the course” (5.7.1–2). See _Macbeth_, ed. Kenneth Muir (Walton-on-Thames, UK: Thomas Nelson, 1997).
makes bondsmen of them all. The men ask themselves if the “law” will abide so much as a defiant bite of the thumb: “Thou shalt not stir one foot to seek a foe” (l. 78). This is the opening statement of *Romeo and Juliet*, reminding us that only by staking one’s life can one come to know what is worth dying for: to know the measure of one’s own life, that which one loves absolutely, as the core of one’s very being.

Many philosophers regard the duel as the elemental scene in the struggle for human self-realization. First, this is because obvious external necessities form the duel’s horizon, especially that we will all die. Not only will you and I die, but you and I will die in such a way that we cannot see each other dead. Our separateness has the structure of a duel because it shows mortality to be the horizon of our otherness to one another. It is the factual separateness at the heart of all our relationships. Second, because mortality is plainly unavoidable, it seems to be the most essential horizon for any self-realization to which we can aspire. That I will eventually die, no matter what I do, is not only a dreary reminder of my unfreedom; my mortality makes me conscious of my freedom, since I now stand in relation to my own mortality and not to some indifferent end point. In a duel, I stake my life with heightened attention to the very real possibility that I will not survive. Third, the duel lays bare the way in which my heightened attention to my finitude entails my keen awareness of another who will either survive me or be survived by me. In the duel, my mortality is not made pressing by some fact of the matter (danger, illness, age, frailty) but because I recognize that someone is trying to kill me. This means that the conditions and limits of my freedom, in the full acknowledgment of my mortality or my constitutive finitude, can only be “mine” through a relation to another.

In making the point that “it is only through risking one’s life that freedom is won,” Hegel shows that this risk entails seeing one’s self through an enemy who

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20 The significance of the duel for modern self-consciousness is given its fullest elaboration in the passages from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* to which I have already referred. But there are antecedents, for example, the *bellum omnium contra omnes*, which in Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1651) characterizes the “state of nature” from which the institutionally inheritable life of the “commonwealth” springs.


23 In Hegel’s words, “Just as each stakes his own life, so each must seek the other’s death” (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, 114 [paragraph 187]).
seeks one’s death. It is not enough for me to risk my life for this or that reason: for God and country, to save the life of another, or for the sheer thrill of it. In a struggle to the death with another, I risk myself in relation to another human being who seeks my death. Indeed, I must see that he risks his life to kill me if I am to “risk” my life in the struggle. If I fail to perceive his murderousness, I do not stake my life; I will simply be slaughtered or ambushed. This moment of “self-externality” is Hegel’s focus. Yet in Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare shows us that, while not inescapable, the life-and-death struggle is less elemental and less dramatically compelling than the love relation. Accordingly, the opening battle of Romeo and Juliet does not end in a death. Nor does it result in a relationship that might be historically reified in a communal or institutional way of life, like the master and slave to which Hegel’s life-and-death struggle gives rise. It is as if Shakespeare presciently agreed with Hegel (and other modern philosophers) when he set the stakes as an intensely dramatic struggle for freedom and self-realization. But it is as if Shakespeare knew that the scene and its dramatic movement must be laid out rather differently if these stakes are to be fully grasped. Subverting the philosophical preoccupation with life-and-death struggles, Shakespeare begins his love tragedy with an aborted duel.

III

But Montague is bound as well as I,
... and ’tis not hard I think
For men so old as we to keep the peace.
—1.2.1–3

As bondsmen to the Prince, both Montague and Capulet readily acknowledge that they must find ways other than fighting to pass the time. They are old and want nothing more than to live out their lives with some measure of gratification. To this end, they hold feasts to mark the coming of spring and arrange marriages. Capulet seeks fulfillment not in the quality of the work he can now accomplish but in the relative mastery he might demonstrate by playing magnanimous host and deciding his daughter’s worldly fate: “Earth hath swallow’d

24 Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, 114 (paragraph 187).
26 If anything, Shakespeare’s drama displays dissolutions of our inherited forms of communal life and their attendant practices—the fracturing of civic ties, familial bonds, and political allegiances. See Paul A. Kottman, Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare: Disinheriting the Globe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2009).
all my hopes but she; / She is the hopeful lady of my earth” (1.2.14–15). After all, Capulet still commands servants; he still rules his household. Or so he believes. Although we have to ask: can the household, or the life of the Family, provide sufficient occasion for individuals to seek their satisfaction?

For his part, having gladly missed the “fray,” young Romeo finds it difficult to pass the time: “Ay me, sad hours seem long” (1.1.115, 159). The cause of the sadness that “lengthens Romeo’s hours” is not mysterious; Benvolio discovers the truth straightway.

**BENVOLIO**

What sadness lengthens Romeo’s hours?

**ROMEO**

Not having that which, having, makes them short.

**BENVOLIO**

In love?

**ROMEO**

Out.

**BENVOLIO**

Of love?

**ROMEO**

Out of her favour where I am in love.

(ll. 161–66)

That “love” here means sexual appetite is obvious enough; Romeo desires to “have” Rosalind (ll. 206–14). This is why Rosalind need not take the stage; she is a mere lack, as Romeo says, a “not having.” At this juncture, Romeo is nothing other than this desiring “emptiness”: “’Tut, I have lost myself, I am not here / This is not Romeo, he’s some other where” (ll. 195–96). Worse, because Rosalind appears to Romeo as forever lacking, he regards himself as condemned to an existence of unsatisfied longing.²⁷

... she’ll not be hit

With Cupid’s arrow, she hath Diana’s wit,

And in strong proof of chastity well arm’d

From love’s weak childish bow she lives uncharm’d.

(ll. 206–9)

Were he to “have” her, she would lose her independent status and become a conquered thing, a filling for his lack. She (Rosalind) is not what Romeo is really missing here; what he desires is a state of fullness. So long as he remains gripped by this unsatisfiable desire, Romeo lives emptily, as if dead: “She hath forsworn to love, and in that vow / Do I live dead, that live to tell it now” (ll. 221–22).

According to Benvolio, all that is required is that Romeo “forget” Rosalind (l. 223ff.) and come to desire another. Benvolio suggests that if this does not happen on its own, then Romeo’s desire should be ruled by something else: “Be rul’d by me,” Benvolio says, “forget to think of her... Examine other beauties” (ll. 223, 226). What Benvolio fails to see is that there is no other “Romeo,” no self-conscious “I,” apart from the sexually desiring “Romeo,” and no way for Romeo to master his own desire, no way for his desire to be ruled. Any willful efforts in this direction only redouble his awareness of his involuntary desire for Rosalind:

Show me a mistress that is passing fair;  
What doth her beauty serve but as a note  
Where I may read who pass’d that passing fair?  
Farewell, thou canst not teach me to forget.  
(ll. 232–35)

But Benvolio’s larger argument is this: as long as one is alive to the world and to others, even if only halfheartedly, then one lack can always be replaced with another. If Romeo’s desire were truly limited to Rosalind, then it would signal the end of his life. “Black and portentious must this humour prove / Unless good counsel may the cause remove” (ll. 139–40). Romeo will get over Rosalind as soon as he finds himself once again subjected to desire’s promiscuity. To feel the resuscitated arousal of desire for another—“some other maid / That I will show you shining at this feast” (1.2.99–100)—is to be thrown back into life, willingly or not.

Tut man, one fire burns out another’s burning  
One pain is lessen’d by another’s anguish...  
Take thou some new infection to thy eye  
And the rank poison of the old will die.  
(ll. 45–46, 49–50)

Such are the enjoyments of the “life” to which Benvolio and Mercutio seek to return young Romeo. It is thus no accident that they arrive as masquers; a masque is a sufficiently pleasing way to formalize conditions under which a

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veritable parade of substitutable objects of desire might appear to each other (“On, lusty gentlemen” [1.4.113]). The masque is more than a formal charade. In the absence of “quarreling” or duels, the masque has now become the content, so to speak, of Verona’s social world.29 Where living is grasped as a satisfying substitution of one desire for another, revelry is the most self-aware form of life to which one might aspire: “A visor for a visor” (l. 30).

As a celebration of desire’s promiscuity, the masque should be no more and no less dramatic than the waxing and waning of appetites. It ought to involve no significant or consequential word or deed; only dancing, flirting, eating, looking, liking. Anxiety should arise merely from an attentive concern for good cheer and a full glass. The time spends itself in the satiation of appetites, until Capulet’s farewell: “let’s to bed. / . . . it waxes late, / I’ll to my rest” (1.5.124–26).

IV

Too early seen unknown, and known too late.
—1.5.138

Although Juliet desires no particular other when she enters the play, she is, like Romeo and his companions, aware of herself as a sexually desiring being. With news of her betrothal to Paris, Juliet approaches the masquerade ready to be moved by eros: “I’ll look to like, if looking liking move” (1.3.97). She thus encounters Romeo in the spirit in which he encounters her. Moved by a desire for one another that replaces all others (“Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight / For I ne’er saw true beauty till this night” [1.5.51–52]), they swiftly progress from looking to speaking to caressing to kissing (ll. 92–109). I take this moment to be a sexual consummation, or as close as Shakespeare can get to showing the lovers having full sexual relations on stage: “You kiss by th’book” (l. 109). I mention this partly to explain why I do not think that Juliet’s later insistence on marriage has anything to do with concerns on her part about legitimating sexual relations between them. (I will provide my understanding of their marriage shortly.) Be fitting the spirit of the masque, this is still an anonymous, replaceable desire. Both are probably masked when they meet.30 Nothing at this point distinguishes Romeo and Juliet’s encounter from the seduction of any other Capulet by Benvolio or Mercutio.

From what, then, does the ensuing drama between Romeo and Juliet arise? The answer turns out to be rather simple: Romeo and Juliet are not satisfied

29 I understand this to be the reason that Capulet turns to masques after nearly thirty years of fighting (1.5.30–40) and forbids Tybalt to fight with Romeo: “Show a fair presence and put off these frowns, / An ill-beseeming semblance of a feast” (1.5.72–73).

30 Recall Tybalt’s comment, “This by his voice should be a Montague . . . Come hither, cover’d with an antic face” (1.5.53, 55). It is not clear that Juliet ever examines Romeo’s face by the light of day until their marriage by the Friar.
with the “satisfaction” offered by the masque and its anonymity. This initial dissatisfaction is sufficient to spur the search for a satisfaction of a different sort. Or, to put the question as Juliet does, “What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?” (2.2.126).

For a start, Romeo and Juliet do not want to remain unknown to one another. Benvolio and Mercutio, by contrast, plainly seek to remain unidentifiable at the masque. They remain revelers at heart and become further and further estranged from Romeo, whose actions appear to them as increasingly confounding: “let [the ladies] measure us by what they will / We'll measure them a measure and be gone” (1.4.9–10). Romeo and Juliet pursue one another because satisfying sexual relations often imply that one has not had enough of the other, sexually (“O trespass sweetly urg'd. / Give me my sin again” [1.5.108–9]). But there is more to Romeo's turnaround and Juliet's soliloquy on the balcony than sexual urges; at the minimum, both want to know whom it is they desire (“Can I go forward when my heart is here? / Turn back, dull earth, and find thy centre out” [2.1.1–2]). This is the decisive turning point; if Romeo and Juliet now want to “know,” to single out, whom they desire, then they must be singled out. This generates a new problem: how are they to recognize one another?

V

What is yond gentleman?
—1.5.126

Who is Juliet? And who is Romeo? Are they recognizable to themselves or others as individuals? In at least one sense, Romeo and Juliet are already identified as particular “individuals.” Within their respective households, Romeo and Juliet are neither faceless citizens nor nameless masquers; in the bosom of their families, they are deemed individuals. Family life is the means by which their singularity is acknowledged. Romeo and Juliet are identifiable only inasmuch as they belong “individually” to a house, tribe, or family. “Is she a Capulet?” (1.5.116). “His name is Romeo, and a Montague” (l. 135).

Moreover, the families recognize the “particularity” of Romeo and Juliet’s being; they attach an absolute value to this individuality, no matter what Romeo and Juliet actually do, no matter how they behave. The first indication of this absolute value is marked by their proper names, their distinctive appellation within the family. But a deeper indication of their absolute value to their families is seen in the “love” shown to them after their deaths. When Juliet’s parents mourn her death after her ingestion of the potion or at the play’s end, we per-

31 This should explain why the lovers’ critique of the “name,” to the point of “doffing” it entirely, must apply to “Capulet” and “Montague” and to “Romeo” and “Juliet” (“Call me but ‘love’ and I’ll be new baptized!” [2.2.50]).
ceive that they acknowledge Juliet's particular value to them, no matter what she does or has done.

This kind of love, as Alexandre Kojève reminds us, “is what is realized in and by the ancient Family.” Kojève explains what such “love” really means: “Since Love does not depend on the acts, on the activity of the loved one, it cannot be ended by his very death. By loving man in his inaction, one considers him as if he were dead. Hence death can change nothing in the Love, in the value attributed by the Family. And that is why Love and the worship of the dead have their place in the pagan Family.” In the ancient family, love of the living is only a form of caring for the dead. Not only does Juliet’s death fail to transform her family’s recognition of her particular value, her death affirms that all along she was treasured as an individual inasmuch as she was, to them, “as good as dead” (“life, living, all is Death’s” [4.5.40]).

Just as parents often look upon their children with the greatest tenderness and appreciation when they are asleep, so too Juliet’s (first) death counterfeits “a pleasant sleep” (4.1.106) in order to trigger the family’s most solemn act of loving care. Juliet’s last words to her mother refuse her company at bedtime: “I pray thee, leave me to myself tonight, . . . / So please you, let me now be left alone / And let the Nurse this night sit up with you” (4.3.2, 9–10). Juliet’s solitude facilitates her secret ingestion of the potion, but the ruse significantly plays upon the confusion of the sleeping child with the dead child. “In thy best robes, uncover’d on the bier / Thou shalt be borne to that same ancient vault / Where all the kindred of the Capulets lie” (4.1.110–12).

32 The phrase “ancient Family” is Kojève’s gloss of Hegel’s discussion of the original or primordial need for familial or kinship organization—a need that Hegel identifies as care for the dead. So although there are of course many differences between ancient forms of kinship and, say, modern bourgeois nuclear families, the term “ancient” here is less a chronological-historicist designation than a philosophical-anthropological one, meant to explain the way in which the task of the family lies primordially in the organization of ritual activities that transform natural facts—the birth and death of individuals—into human deeds, like naming and burying. By invoking Kojève’s gloss of Hegel in the following pages, I mean to invoke the ancient family in this broad philosophical-anthropological sense, namely, as that form of human sociality charged with responding to the need to care for individuals in their very being (dead or alive). I understand Shakespeare’s depiction of the Capulet clan—in particular, the emphasis on Capulet’s response to Juliet’s (first) death, and the centrality of the Capulet tomb—as manifestations of the ancient family in Kojève’s sense. For more on the importance of caring for the dead in human sociality, see my discussion of Hegel and Hamlet in my Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2009), 44–77.

Is the struggle for freedom and self-realization wholly condition by our constitutive mortality? Can we claim our fate as our own, and thereby claim our very lives as something more than a debt owed to mortality, nature, our family? Such are the questions that haunt Romeo and Juliet’s predicament. Juliet’s predicament is particularly stark in this regard, since Romeo’s gender and status give him a relative freedom of movement in Verona. Within the more austere restrictions of the Capulet household, Juliet is a mere extension of her father’s actions, as witnessed by her betrothal to Paris. When Juliet seeks to negate the demand that she marry Paris (“Hear me with patience but to speak a word” [3.5.159]), her father will have none of it.

Mistress minion you, . . .
. . . fettle your fine joints ‘gainst Thursday next
To go with Paris to Saint Peter’s Church,
Or I will drag thee on a hurdle thither.
. . . get thee to church a Thursday
Or never after look me in the face.
Speak not, reply not, do not answer me.
(ll. 151, 153–155, 161–63)

Because she cannot even “speak” the word “no” to her family, Juliet comes to see that her life is valued by her family only because she is, to them, already “as good as dead,” as we hear in Lady Capulet’s chilling words: “I would the fool were married to her grave” (l. 140). “Talk not to me,” she tells her daughter, “for I’ll not speak a word / Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee” (3.5.202–3).

If the ancient family loves individuals as if they were “as good as dead,” providing conditions only for corporeal sustenance, “nursing,” and well-being, then such care is inadequate to a living individual who seeks to claim her fate as her own. The family looks like a “womb of death” (5.3.45). By the very same token,

34 After Tybalt’s death, Capulet appears to suggest to Paris that the marriage is contingent upon Juliet’s approval: “Things have fallen out, sir, so unluckily / That we have had no time to move our daughter” (3.4.1–2). All the same, Capulet offers Juliet no alternative when he puts the matter to her directly.

35 Juliet’s Nurse, perhaps the “household” figure par excellence, ultimately sides with the biological family as well, urging Juliet to consider her life only in terms of the conditions for meeting its biological necessities (3.5.212–27). Juliet sees the Nurse, finally, as “Ancient damnation” (l. 235). As well, consider how the Nurse raises Juliet to see herself as a beautiful corpse from the start: “Thou wast the prettiest babe that e’er I nurs’d” (1.3.60).
however, the ancient family also turns itself into an occasion for Juliet to claim her life as her own, by showing her exactly what she must rupture if she is to really live. The stakes are clear—Juliet must subvert her household’s authority, as well as the very source of that authority: the claims of mortality upon human sociality. Juliet must refuse something of this debt if her life is to become hers. This is why Juliet finally seeks her freedom by undertaking “a thing like death . . . That cop’st with death himself to scape from it” (4.1.74–75; emphasis added) and why, for the same reason, the lovers eventually “take their life” together nowhere but in the family tomb (Prologue, l. 6).

VII

Prodigious birth of love.
—1.5.139

Only by showing that the ancient family is opposed to and thus separable from the claims of the living individual can Juliet see herself as truly living her life. But this can happen only from within the life of the family, since the individual cannot as yet regard herself as free to seek her own life outside the family. How might this come about? Actually, very little is required; nothing more than a hospitable gesture. It is enough for the family to admit within its fold, for a time, some guests from the larger community.

TYBALT Uncle, this is a Montague, our foe:
A villain that is hither come in spite
To scorn at our solemnity this night. . . .

CAPULET Content thee, gentle coz, let him alone, . . .
He shall be endur’d.

(1.5.60–62, 64, 75)

This seemingly innocuous admittance of a “foe” shows that the ancient family easily, even routinely, acknowledges individual lives for whom it need not care (“Young Romeo is it?” [1.5.63]). Because Romeo does not appear at the feast as an external enemy, but as a “virtuous and well-govern’d youth” about whom “Verona brags” (ll. 67, 66), his presence bears witness to openness within the ancient family that, like the chink in the wall between the houses of Pyramus and Thisbe, had been there all along. The occasion provides Juliet and Romeo with all they require—a chance to encounter one another within family without needing to relate to one another as family.36 “Thus I enforce thy rotten jaws to open, / And in despite I’ll cram thee

36 That Romeo and Juliet are by rank, age, title, and Capulet’s own admission (1.5.63–66) eligible marriage partners for one another is additional support for my claim that the lovers are
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with more food” (5.3.47–48). When Romeo and Juliet learn of the “house” to which the other belongs, they do not despair. On the contrary, Juliet rejoices in the possibilities that have been opened:

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.

(1.5.137–40)

Given such a chance, then, how is one to claim one’s life as one’s own? What will count as a freely lived life? “What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?” (2.2.126).

One traditional answer to this question is that a free life is one that can pursue, or move toward, whatever it desires. To be sure, there is no point in denying Romeo and Juliet’s desire for sexual knowledge of one another (“O that I were a glove upon that hand, / That I might touch that cheek” [ll. 24–25]). However, does the “satisfaction” of which the lovers talk in the balcony scene bespeak anything other than an anticipated sexual encounter—anything aside from hauling oneself across the keel of eros, lack and fulfillment, desire and satisfaction? Is there anything more desirable for human beings than the unimpeded motion of their limbs? Which means asking: what, finally, do Romeo and Juliet want with one another?

VIII

And what love can do, that dares love attempt.
—2.2.68

We are now in a position to return to the questions raised at the outset. There, we saw that claiming my life and my freedom as my own requires both that I risk my life and that I find myself in another. But we saw that Shakespeare, in contrast to Hegel, does not regard the “duel” as the most elemental scene for this struggle. We asked, How does the struggle for freedom and self-realization begin, if not as a duel? We can now put the question another way: is the horizon not divided by insuperable social obstacles. The household (or “womb of death” [5.3.45]) now looks capable of giving “birth” to a life—of gestating a love life—that is not just “good-as-dead.”

37 This is probably the most recognizable definition of freedom in the modern liberal tradition, with its origins in Hobbes’s famous definition of freedom as “the absence of opposition [or] external impediments.” “A Freeman,” Hobbes writes, “is he that, in those things which by his strength and wit he is able to do, is not hindered to do what he has a will to.” See Leviathan, ed. A. P. Martinich (Ontario: Broadview, 2002), 190.
of all enmity—the fact that one of us will see the other die—transformable, if not avoidable? Can external necessity—the “given” fact of human mortality, our separateness—be regarded as internal to free acts of mutual self-recognition?

Shakespeare’s wager will not surprise us. Romeo and Juliet do indeed stake their lives, but not as mortal foes. They “take their lives” as lovers whose eventual fate, as a double suicide wherein each sees the other dead, confounds the very structure of the duel, the externality of enmity: “Look thou but sweet / And I am proof against their enmity” (2.2.72–73). Romeo denies the claims of alien necessity upon his life (he seeks his freedom) not by a struggle to the death with a foe, but by revealing this necessity (for example, the historical enmity of Capulet and Montague, or our constitutive finitude as human beings) to be a mere pretext for risking his life for something else entirely: namely, for a love relation. “My life were better ended by their hate / Than death prorogued, wanting of thy love” (ll. 77–78). He denies that enmity is the only external grounds for self-realization, finding these grounds instead in Juliet (“Alack, there lies more peril in thine eye / Than twenty of their swords” [ll. 71–72]).

To strive for recognition as a lover is to find a moment of freedom that might be regarded as having bypassed the need for a fight-to-the-death, without having eliminated its possibility. In fact, this is just how Romeo and Juliet see things:

**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,
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 in twenty of their swords. Look thou but sweet
And I am proof against their enmity.

(ll. 62–73)

More generally, the lovers seek a different reckoning with mortality. To be clear, the lovers are not denying mortality as such, as in the Christian mystery, where God’s love for the world is shown through Christ’s victory over death and dying, or as in Dante’s depiction of Beatrice, where amorous love leads to the vision of posthumous love, the *alta fantasia* of the beloved’s immortality. In my view, Dante’s Christian “fantasies” are not a metaphysical flight from the claims of the beloved’s mortal embodiment. Rather, they express a remarkable, if still mystified, awareness that the love relation, the struggle for human freedom, is
not wholly determined by the hard truth that one will outlive the other. The
development of a love affair has an instituting power all its own, correspondent
to the poetic invention depicting it. All the same, Shakespeare's play offers no
fantasies of life after death.

_We do not deny death's inevitability_, say Shakespeare's lovers. _We know that we_
are not immortal. _We do not challenge the finality of our separateness._

_But what we utterly refuse to accept is that this finality is an alien, external neces-
sity—something we passively suffer as our “misfortune” or “destiny.”_

_We defy all transcendent powers—including death—just as we defy the stars!_
If we fail in this defiance, then we are not free.
In fact, we will stake our lives to show that our separateness is not an alien neces-
sity to which we are slavishly subjected, irrespective of our own actions.

_Quite the contrary! Our actions shall show our separateness to be what is most_
immanently our own._

IX

_It is my lady, O it is my love!_
_ O that she knew she were!_
_—2.2.10–11_

So, let us ask again: what satisfaction can the lovers have tonight? Shakespeare's
answer is straightforward enough: recognition. The lover seeks recognition as a
lover “in life” from the only other one capable of bestowing this nontransferrable
prestige: the beloved. This means that the beloved appears neither as an external
object of sexual desire (as Rosalind had previously appeared to Romeo) nor as
someone to be conquered (like the “foe” in the life-and-death struggle). On the con-
trary, because Romeo cannot possess or conquer Juliet she has become as essential
to him as he is to her. “[H]er I love now,” Romeo confesses to the Friar, “Doth grace
for grace and love for love allow. / The other [Rosalind] did not so” (2.3.81–83).

_The beloved is a living subject on whose reciprocal recognition the lover_
depends in order to be, or to become, a lover._38 As Orlando learns in the Forest of
Arden, no external sign (no poetry hung upon a tree, no oath, no protestation)
can gain him recognition as Rosalind / Ganymede’s “lover” until she herself,”the
inexpressive she,” recognizes him. Orlando cannot even “know” her—that is, he

38 Because Rosalind was merely an object of Romeo’s desire—someone to be a conquest—she
did not need to recognize Romeo in order to be desirable to him, any more than a glass of water
needs to recognize a thirsty person in order to be thirsted after. If Rosalind only existed for him
as something to be made _his_ or _not his_, then she was not truly a free individual in relation to
him; and if she was not seen by Romeo as truly free, then Romeo could not be freely recognized
by her as free himself.
cannot even recognize her as his “very Rosalind”—until he gains from her recognition that he is her lover. To make one's love for another known to her entails being recognized by her as her lover.39

This requires acknowledging her as a free, self-conscious individual, not merely naming her as the object of one's affections. What is required, then, is an act of mutual self-recognition: “Dost thou love me? I know thou wilt say ‘Ay,’ / And I will take thy word” (2.2.90–91). Moreover, because freedom arises only as a moment of such mutual self-recognition, the moment or recognition must duly appear to be freely performed. Accordingly, the lovers' dialogue denies any necessity impinging on its free development (“for stony limits cannot hold love out” [l. 67]). Luck, chance, nature, and objective realities have not faded from the scene entirely, but they now appear on the world stage through a fate claimed by the lovers. The space separating the orchard from the balcony and the time between this night and tomorrow are given over to the lovers' words. No third party mediates. There is no matchmaker, ritual occasion, or historical necessity. Nothing compels Juliet to her window; she speaks to the stars of her own accord. Romeo does not accidentally stumble upon Juliet in the darkness; he has purposefully sought her out.

Speaking first, in “the numbers that Petrarch flowed in” (2.4.40), Romeo rhapsodizes the sight of Juliet's singular body: “The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars / As daylight doth a lamp” (2.2.19–20). The inappropriateness of epideictic speech is immediately apparent; I understand this to be part of Shakespeare's deep critique of Petrarchism.40 Because his sonnet could regard Juliet only as an object of sight, she could not be recognized—or “acknowledged,” as Stanley Cavell would say—through the sonnet as a subject or speaker of words.41 Hence, when the beautiful apparition speaks—“Ay me” (l. 25)—Romeo is forced to halt his rhapsody and to recognize Juliet as a free agent: “She speaks / O speak again bright angel” (ll. 25–26). Because Juliet speaks freely—to herself at night, under no external obligation, to no other listener—it is her own free actions, her freedom, that Romeo must apprehend if he is to recognize her at all.

Romeo thus confronts Juliet—her thinking, her questioning—as the budding actualization of her individual freedom. To utter or think a question is to discover that there is nothing that one might not think or say, no question

40 For a discussion of the way in which Shakespeare's sonnets and plays structurally imply not a silent addressee or love object but another speaking subject, see David Schalkwyk, Speech and Performance in Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Plays (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002).
one might not pose. How easily even the most stringent external necessity lends itself to interrogation! “O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?” (l. 33). Once Romeo sees that recognizing Juliet means recognizing her “free speech,” the problem of his own freedom is thrown into stark relief. Nothing compels Romeo to answer Juliet; in fact, nothing prevents him from remaining silent, bearing witness to her free speech without claiming his own. Because no response is obliged or prohibited, Romeo must claim his action or inaction as his own: “Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?” (l. 37).

Yet this moves a bit too fast. Although Juliet speaks freely to herself, questioning and thinking aloud, she has not yet been recognized by another as free. She is not yet free for another, with another. Not only must Romeo alert Juliet to his presence, he must reveal himself to her as her audience and interlocutor. His challenge is to allow Juliet to appear free to him and with him—to make himself necessary for Juliet’s freedom.

X

O be some other name.
—2.2.42

There are many ways to appear necessary for another’s self-realization. Most evidently, one can appear capable of furnishing the occasion or conditions for another to act on his own. Let us suppose that these conditions range from a parent’s loving attention facilitating a child’s developing autonomy to the institutional forms of recognition that can bestow liberties upon a human being. In such cases, one’s actions are “necessary conditions” for another’s freedom by being, in principle, performable by anyone endowed with a certain standing within the family, state, or civil society. Because only a “member in good standing”—someone possessed of the appropriate rank, title, or position—can extend the form of recognition necessary for another’s relative freedom, such acts are not mutually free. The effectiveness of the actions of the “member in good standing” is dependent on her membership, not on whom she recognizes.

Membership in a collective necessarily precludes acts of free mutual self-recognition, inasmuch as it remains a function of hierarchy. This is why Romeo and Juliet’s recognition of one another is not dependent upon any hierarchical membership in a broader form of social life. This, and not the need to establish that “who” Romeo is can be separated from “what” he is called, is why the lovers wish to doff their families’ titles: “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” (2.2.34–36). By distinguishing Romeo from “Romeo”—“So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call’d, / Retain that dear perfection which he owes / Without that title” (ll. 45–47)—Juliet is not establishing the obvious fact that Romeo’s physical
singularity is not a name. That “a rose by any other word would smell as sweet” is hardly a questionable conclusion. Instead, when Juliet observes, “’Tis but thy name that is my enemy: / Thou art thyself, though not a Montague” (ll. 38–39), she asserts the extent to which they can recognize one another, apart from any other membership or belonging:

**Juliet**

Romeo, doff thy name,
And for thy name, which is no part of thee
Take all myself.

**Romeo**

I take thee at thy word
Call me but love, and I’ll be new baptis’d:
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.

(ll. 47–51)

All that is required is that “that dear perfection which he owes / Without that title” adhere not in any “recognition” bestowed by the house of Montague, but in his active self-individuation.

Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What’s Montague? It is nor hand nor foot
Nor arm nor face nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O be some other name.

(ll. 39–42)

It is this nascent “own-ness” that Romeo enacts when he responds, unseen in the darkness.

By a name
I know not how to tell thee who I am:
My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself
Because it is an enemy to thee.
Had I it written, I would tear the word.

(ll. 53–57)

It can be disconcerting to hear “By a name / I know not how to tell who I am” spoken in the dark by an unseen intruder. Juliet is given the chance to recognize not Romeo’s name (nor any other objective indicator, like his face) but his active (spoken) self-individuation:

**Juliet**

My ears have yet not drunk a hundred words
Of thy tongue’s uttering, yet I know the sound.
Art thou not Romeo, and a Montague?

**Romeo**

Neither, fair maid, if either thee dislike.

(ll. 58–61)
In this mutual self-recognition, they are not only free “in themselves” but immediately free “with one another.”

Of course, if there is truly no mediation here, if nothing really stands between them (“Stony limits cannot hold love out” [l. 67]), then there is nothing external, nothing substantial, no “third party” binding them absolutely to one another. “I am afeard, / Being in night, all this is but a dream, / Too flattering sweet to be substantial” (ll. 139–41).

The lovers’ next impulse is to grasp some external bearing through solemn vows: “O gentle Romeo, / If thou dost love, pronounce it faithfully” (ll. 93–94). By grasping at such straws, it becomes apparent that nothing can substantiate the oath:

| ROMEO | Lady, by yonder blessed moon I vow . . . |
| JULIET | O swear not by the moon, th’inconstant moon . . . |
| ROMEO | What shall I swear by? |
| JULIET | Do not swear at all. Or if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self, Which is the god of my idolatry, And I’ll believe thee. |
| ROMEO | If my heart’s dear love— |
| JULIET | Well, do not swear. Although I joy in thee, I have no joy of this contract tonight. |

(ll. 107, 109, 112–17)

If contracts bring no joy, then the sought “satisfaction” must lie in the free act of mutual self-recognition, whereby one claims one’s own freedom through another’s. This is Shakespeare’s answer to the question “what satisfaction canst thou have tonight?”

| ROMEO | Th’exchange of thy love’s faithful vow for mine. |
| JULIET | I gave thee mine before thou did’st request it, And yet . . . I would it were to give again And yet I wish but for the thing I have. 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. |

(ll. 127–29, 132–35)

The young Hegel referred to these lines as the paradigmatic expression of mutual self-recognition and earthly happiness, and it is difficult to disagree.42 That the lovers freely and mutually recognize one another in such short order

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accounts for the exhilarating rush of the scene: the urgency and joy of claiming one’s own life to be “infinite” through another, not as private transcendence, but as a worldly realization of freedom through another. To audiences around the world, this moment has seemed a quintessential depiction of lovers, a profound profession of human happiness.

So, what goes wrong? Why does Shakespeare know that we cannot stop here?

XI

Parting is such sweet sorrow.

—2.2.184

Shakespeare seems to have been tempted to end the scene at this moment; hence, the next lines: “I hear some noise within. Dear love, adieu” (2.2.136). But ending the scene here would mean showing the lovers to be subject to worldly demands and intrusions. Shakespeare knows, I think, that such intrusions do not determine Romeo and Juliet’s fate as lovers—they are at most sources of frustrating interruptions—and so he does not let us off the hook so easily. “Stay but a little,” Juliet tells Romeo, “I will come again” (2.2.138).

So Romeo stays. And stays.

No external demand really compels them to part this night. The only reason that Juliet can find to send Romeo away is so that he can arrange a time and place for them to marry. This raises the question: why do they marry at all? The Friar sees in the marriage an opportunity to turn the household’s rancor to love; for her part, the Nurse sees nothing more than the chance to make some extra money (2.4.146–49). As I see it, Romeo and Juliet do not marry to legitimize their sexual relations or to appease their families, as if they were worried about what God or the Nurse might think of the rope ladder dangling from Juliet’s bedchamber. They seem content to celebrate the marriage in the privacy of the confessional, eschewing public acknowledgment. Elsewhere, at any rate, Shakespeare depicts marriages that not only flout social expectation (Othello) but fulfill no social function (As You Like It). Romeo and Juliet marry to underscore that their mutual self-recognition means taking matters into their own hands, a further expression of their own self-determination:

[B]ut 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.

(2.6.3–8)
The tragic turn in the drama is not the return of alien necessities (family enmity, civic laws, betrothals, biological necessities), but rather a reversal that is intrinsic to the lovers' ability to defy external necessity. This turn is so familiar that it passes almost imperceptibly. Because nothing external comes between the lovers, they have no obligation to part. Since they nevertheless must separate—even if just to sleep—this “parting” must itself become the content of their newfound freedom. Meticulously, the conclusion of the balcony scene unfolds as a reflection on this self-defeating turn within the lovers' freedom. This turn is familiar to all lovers. Because no external power divides them, it is up to them to say “good night”—“Three words, dear Romeo, and good night indeed”; “A thousand times good night” (2.2.142, 154).

You have to be on your way—says Juliet—so that you can find a place and time for us to marry.

And so Romeo departs, only to hear himself called again. “Hist! Romeo, hist! O for a falconer’s voice / To lure this tassel-gentle back again” (ll. 158–59). But why does Juliet lure him back? Merely to ask at what time she should send the Nurse to him.

By the hour of nine.
I will not fail . . . .

[Awkward pause.]
I have forgot why I did call thee back.

Let me stand here till thou remember it.

I shall forget, to have thee still stand there,
Remembering how I love thy company.
And I’ll still stay to have thee still forget.
(ll. 168–74, emphasis added)

We know how these conversations go. They mark the rhythm of an exchange that has discovered the vertiginous substance of its own freedom. You say good night; no, you say good night . . . . You hang up; no, you, hang up . . . .

Is this the upshot of mutual self-recognition? Is this what the happiness of freedom looks like? “Good night, good night. Parting is such sweet sorrow / That I shall say good night till it be morrow” (ll. 184–85). If we are honest with ourselves, is not what every lover wants at such moments, really, to hang up the phone? To say, sweetly and sincerely but finally, “good night”? Would not the finality of the good night or adieu be the truest actualization of this newfound freedom? This, I think, is what we hear when the drowsy Juliet tries to put a stop to things, murmuring:

’Tis almost morning, I would have thee gone,
And yet no farther than a wanton’s bird, . . .
So loving-jealous of his liberty.
I wish I were thy bird.

Sweet, so [yawns Juliet] would I.
(ll. 176–77, 181–82)

But because separation is the operation of the lovers' very freedom, an apprehension hinders peaceful sleep, "yet I should kill thee with much cherishing" (l. 183).

XII

These violent delights have violent ends
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,
Which as they kiss consume.
—2.6.9–11

"O sweet Juliet," cries Romeo, before taking up his sword against Tybalt, "Thy beauty hath made me effeminate soften'd valour's steel" / And in my temper (3.1.115–17). Romeo's love of Juliet is not disavowed by his murder of Tybalt, any more than it is replaced by his love of Mercutio. Neither love is refused. What Romeo learns, rather, is that to be a lover—of Mercutio or Juliet—requires him to stake his life, even when there is no prize to be gained and when the quarrel is manifestly pointless and decides nothing. Self-realization requires staking one's life through another; because Tybalt seeks not an ambush but a "quarrel" with Romeo, Romeo cannot stake his life without taking up his sword. When Mercutio complains about Romeo's "vile submission," he is not complaining about the humiliation of conceding to a Capulet; he is suggesting that to refuse to take up the sword in the face of a challenge is to efface oneself utterly. Romeo's initial reluctance to do so—namely, that he empties himself of standing as a self-determining individual, a self-evacuation through which Tybalt's sword passes unobstructed—is what brings about Mercutio's death. To ask whether the duel is "worth fighting" for some other reason or other (family enmity, friendship, or honor) is to ask the wrong question. As both Hegel and Shakespeare recognized, that dueling need have no further ethical justification (honor and so forth) accounts for its significance in the struggle for self-realization. In the face of this, Romeo must accept Tybalt's challenge if he is to reaffirm his own existence: "Either thou, or I, or both" (3.1.131).

At the same time, by slaying Tybalt, Romeo ends up accomplishing only what the city itself would have undertaken: "His fault concludes but what the law should end / The life of Tybalt" (3.1.187–88) Seen by others to have taken the law, not his life, into his own hands, Romeo loses his standing as a citizen without losing his life. "The law that death . . . turns threaten'd it to exile" (3.3). Romeo's life is spared, and his only mortal foe vanquished: "Tybalt would kill
thee, / But thou slew'st Tybalt. There art thou happy” (ll. 136–37). Romeo’s initial reaction—“There is no world without Verona walls,” “banished’ / Is death, misterm’d” (ll. 20–21)—looks, as the Friar points out, hysterical and overwrought. There is every reason to think that the Friar is right to counsel patience “till we can find a time / To blaze your marriage, reconcile your friends, / Beg pardon of the Prince and call thee back” to Verona (ll. 149–51). His “comfort . . . reviv’d by this” sensible perspective (l. 164), Romeo ascends to Juliet’s chamber to reassure her. Life has brought a few surprises, but all is far from lost. No more leaping over stony walls. Romeo now makes himself at home for the night in Juliet’s chamber.

Shakespeare shows the lovers aloft at Juliet’s window, perhaps in bed. There is no resigned, tearful acceptance of the necessity of saying goodbye. On the contrary, the lovers begin with a bald-faced denial of the external demands that they supposedly face. “Wilt thou be gone?” begins Juliet (3.5.1). Their aubade is well known; but let us listen again, this time for their denial not only of the external necessity of parting but also of nature’s claims, society’s demands, time’s passage, reality’s necessities tout court. The lovers flagrantly, almost comically, claim for themselves the power to outstrip reality’s demands.

It is not yet near day.
It was the nightingale and not the lark
That pierc’d the fearful hollow of thine ear . . . .
Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.

(3.5.1–3, 5)

“Therefore,” continues Juliet defiantly, “stay yet: thou need’st not to be gone” (l. 16).

None of this should astonish us. We routinely defy the world’s demands and the passage of time by pushing the snooze button on our alarm clock or by pushing it twice. Or by making love in the morning, before heading off to work. Or by “calling in sick.” To be free and self-determining is to be perfectly capable of making day night, or night day. This is not a disavowal of the “real” limitations of their worldly position. Rather, the lovers together come to the realization that these limitations are not fully “limiting” so far as they are concerned. If objective obstacles do not disappear, then they do not govern their interactions absolutely. Stay yet: thou need’st not to be gone.

The starkest “reality” with which they must contend is not the Prince’s decree or the earth’s rotation. The more profound “reality” is that night and day are what they make them out to be—that Romeo need not leave, that Juliet need not stay, that no external power separates them absolutely. Juliet has already promised to “follow” Romeo “throughout the world,” and there is nothing to prevent her from slipping off to Mantua with him here (2.2.148). Juliet is perfectly willing—as we
see in the very next scene—to accept the Friar’s “remedy” in the hopes that, when she wakes from the drug, Romeo shall “bear” her “hence to Mantua” (4.1.117). Although she is later willing to accept an escape to Mantua rather than marry Paris, she does not rush to flee at this moment, when she could have made her escape “disguis’d” (3.3.167) alongside Romeo without the use of exotic drugs. Shakespeare knew perfectly well how to stage an escape for a woman in disguise; the Friar suggests as much.

At this point, then, Romeo abandons his “realism” (“I must be gone and live, or stay and die” [3.5.11]), takes Juliet’s wager, and raises the ante.

\[
\text{Let me be ta'en, let me be put to death,}
\text{I am content, so thou wilt have it so.}
\text{I'll say yon grey is not the morning's eye,}
\text{'Tis but the pale reflex of Cynthia's brow.}
\text{Nor that is not the lark whose notes do beat}
\text{The vaulty heaven so high above our heads.}
\text{I have more care to stay than will to go.}
\text{Come death, and welcome. Juliet wills it so.}
\]

(ll. 17–24)

A pause ensues. Romeo and Juliet have agreed to take their lives into their own hands, irrespective of the world’s power over them. In the end, it was not so difficult to do. All that is required is all that is ever required—that they stake their lives; that they not flinch in the face of death. As we know, Romeo and Juliet never recoil in the face of death. She will soon take up his dagger. Desperate measures will come.

*It is not the fear of death that will separate them.*

“O tell me not of fear” (4.1.121).

Romeo’s next words—not death—are what truly terrify Juliet. *You’re right, my love*—Romeo says —*day and night are what we make them.*

*I need not leave. You need not remain. We can stay together. So... let’s talk.*

“How is’t my soul? Let’s talk. It is not day” (3.5.25).

“Let’s talk.” With these words, it becomes clear that what separates them is the very freedom that has afforded them such exhilaration. For Juliet must now see Romeo himself. No night to hide her blush; no father to deny; no name to doff; no more walls to climb; no more excuses.

But how is this to be faced? If nothing external divides them, then their separateness—if it is to be a source of freedom and happiness—must be actively accomplished and not passively suffered. Juliet does not hesitate. She banishes Romeo herself. “It is [day], it is. Hie hence, begone, away” (l. 26). The bird “so loving-jealous of his liberty,” through whose song external obstacles first vanished, now sings of freedom’s internal discord.
DEFYING THE STARS

It is the lark that sings so out of tune,
Straining harsh discords and unpleasing sharps.
Some say the lark makes sweet division.
This doth not so, for she divideth us . . .
O now be gone.

(ll. 27–30, 35)

XIII

If thou dar’st, I’ll give thee remedy.
—4.1.76

By banishing Romeo, Juliet claims something of her freedom. This is not to say that it was easy or pleasurable. After watching Romeo descend from her window following just “one kiss,” she says, “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” (3.5.55–57). Romeo replies, “trust me, love, in my eye so do you. / Dry sorrow drinks our blood” (ll. 58–59).

While for many readers, this foreshadows the play’s final scene, I take the moment to be far more prosaic. The lovers are, in effect, breaking up. The relationship is not over, but the lovers are coming to grips with their freedom with one another as their capacity for active separation, with the fact that claiming this separateness, even in its sorrowful effects, is the essential happiness of their individual lives. Neither wants the other to truly die; Juliet is not saying that she wants “to see Romeo dead in the bottom of a tomb.” Romeo’s “real” death would indeed be incompatible with the happiness of her newfound freedom. Rather, she expresses something of the inverse; because Romeo did not have to die to accomplish their separation—as in the traditional marriage vow, “until death do us part”—they can claim the separation, this little death, as their own doing. They have not really lost blood; they have made themselves pale “and all these woes shall serve / For sweet discourses in our times to come” (ll. 52–53).

For the first and last time Juliet faces a sunrise, a future, that appears to her open and undecided. Perhaps they “shall . . . meet again” (l. 51). She is anything but suicidal at this moment. She radiates the happiness of self-realization. She faces the morning sun with aplomb. “Be fickle, Fortune . . . But send him back” (ll. 62, 64).

43 Juliet hardly lingers over the sight when she gets the chance to see Romeo dead. Perhaps an analyst could tell Julia Kristeva why she wants to claim “that Juliet’s jouissance is often stated through the . . . desire . . . of Romeo’s death.” See Tales of Love, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), 221.
44 To the objection that Juliet sends Romeo away out of fear of the social powers inimical to his safety, note that Juliet’s words come before the Nurse’s early warning—“The day is broke; be
Her self-determination is immediately put to the test by the news that her mother cannot wait until after breakfast to share: Juliet must marry Paris on Thursday. Having only moments ago tasted freedom with Romeo, she is folded back into the bonds of the ancient family. This, we might think, is what drives her to suicide. And it is true that she would rather die than marry Paris. She will negate her family’s demand at any cost: “Shall I be married then tomorrow morning? / No! No! This shall forbid it. Lie thou there. [She lays down a knife] (4.3.22–23, sd).

However, it is not exactly right to conclude only that she resolves to kill herself to avoid marrying Paris. Because this alternative—suicide or marriage to Paris—would merely decide the fate of her individuality as it is already acknowledged and valued by her family, this choice appears to Juliet as unfree, unsatisfying. Either way, she would belong to the Capulets as a lifeless body. In seeking a “remedy,” what Juliet wants is a third option—something other than this marriage or suicide.

Because the Nurse offers no remedy, Juliet turns to the Friar: “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). Juliet wants to separate herself from her family other than by dying. She wishes to separate her death from her family’s claim upon her life. This is why she does not kill herself straightaway upon hearing her father’s firm instruction. Instead, she threatens to pin her suicide on the Friar should he fail to help her negate her family’s demand. Dying under these circumstances would seal her place in the ancient family forever, but also because, if the Friar failed to provide a remedy, then—and this, I think, is the wild desperation—suicide would be a sad necessity, an act demonstrating her absolute loss of freedom. She stakes her life for freedom, in order to avoid a direct, necessary conflict with her family.

In light of this, we can demystify the Friar’s medicinal remedy—a device that is at least as old as Xenophon’s popular Ephesian Tale, and that has been a notorious source of perplexity.

[If] Thou hast the strength of will to slay thyself,
Then it is likely thou wilt undertake
A thing like death to chide away this shame,
That cop’st with death himself to scape from it.

(ll. 72–75)
The Friar’s plan does not require Juliet to oppose her family.  On the contrary, it exploits the fulfillment of the family’s highest duty in order to make possible for Juliet a life beyond her value to them. The point is not to make her immortal, but to separate her life and eventual (real) death from her family’s power to assign her life its final value, not by denying the family the chance to care for her corpse, but by letting the family accomplish precisely that. His plan would free Juliet by reconciling her to the Family, letting her be as “dead to them” as she has always been. As he knows, Juliet’s freedom cannot come through a conflict with the Family; if her freedom is merely liberation from a family to which she must stand in necessary opposition, she can never claim her freedom as her own. The Friar’s plan allows those who love Juliet to be able to claim that “love” through the formal activity appropriate to it: the funerary rite. Because Juliet’s family “loves” her in her very being, and assigns to her body an absolute value of its own accord, she does belong to them as this valued body. She must acknowledge this debt if she is to claim her life. She must “die” to them, be buried, and be mourned. But because this death will be counterfeit—“a thing like death”—it turns the family’s most sacred act of love into a ceremonial sham. She will find freedom not by openly opposing the family’s love but by revealing that love, once it has been accomplished, to be a hollow formality—an empty tomb. In this sense, the ruse exposes the gap between their blindness to her (her self-realization, her freedom) and their perception of her individual bodily vitality. By allowing Juliet to seem to her family precisely as she has always seemed to them—a sleeping beauty, “as good as dead”—the strategy depends upon nothing more than the family’s inability to distinguish between their dozing child and their dead child. Moreover, by surviving her own burial, Juliet would achieve a state in which the meaning of her actions, for her and us, will be irreducible to their consequences for the community into which she was born. She neither seeks nor finds her freedom through some action of hers in the social world—say, by acting in recognizable fidelity to social norms (marrying) or by openly transgressing the world’s laws (suicide). On the contrary, by letting her body be buried in the family vault in order to extricate herself from her family, she negates the difference between fidelity and betrayal, duty and transgression. However, the Friar is no magician. Juliet will pay a price for this chance of freedom beyond the macabre business of sleeping with the dead, of which she is already well aware. “Give me, give me!” she cries, “O tell me not of fear” (4.1.121). What is required is not simply contact with corpses, but the acknowledgment that these corpses were once her family, her ancestors.

46 The Friar in fact instructs Juliet to agree to the marriage: “Go home, be merry, give consent / To marry Paris” (4.1.89–90).
How if, when I am laid in the tomb,
I wake before the time that Romeo
Come to redeem me? There’s a fearful point!
... a vault, an ancient receptacle
Where for this many hundred years the bones
Of all my buried ancestors are pack’d,
Where bloody Tybalt yet green in earth
Lies festering in his shroud.

(4.3.30–32, 39–43)

This awareness carries with it another, darker reality. By making a mockery of her family’s care for her dead body—by turning familial love, and its valuation of her, into a charade—she will not be able to see her dead family members as anything other than mere corpses, shapes of natural degradation. Because she will have emptied the family’s funeral of its meaning, she will not be able to find in the bodies of the dead anything worthy of valuation, of loving treatment. The dead will have lost their dignity for her, and will seem nothing more than rotten remains. Therefore, the cost of her freedom is high indeed. Not only must she outlive the claims of her living family members on her life, she must forsake the community of the living and the dead that binds her to others as human. “My dismal scene I needs must act alone” (l. 19). Henceforth, she can do nothing for the dead but plunder their corpses for a means of self-destruction.

... madly play with my forefathers’ joints,
And pluck the mangled Tybalt from his shroud,
And, in this rage, with some great kinsman’s bone
As with a club dash out my desperate brains? ...
Romeo, Romeo, Romeo, here’s drink! I drink to thee!

(ll. 49, 51–54, 58)

What makes Juliet’s stratagem all the more shocking is the evidence of our own affective investment in its outcome, our own disinvestment from the fate of the community. Let Verona in Adige in melt! A plague on both houses! Just let the lovers claim their lives as their own!

Just as she had feared, Juliet awakens in the tomb, among decaying corpses, covered with a dead man. “Thy husband in thy bosom there lies dead” (5.3.155). “A greater power than we can contradict / Hath thwarted our intentions,” explains the Friar (ll. 153–54). Nevertheless, Juliet’s aims have not been entirely contradicted. Yes, Romeo is dead, but Juliet’s freedom has not been foreclosed entirely, as she demonstrates when she dismisses the Friar—“Go, get thee hence, for I will not away” (l. 160). In Romeo’s death, she sees the outcome of his own
actions. He was not slain by Paris, nor was he killed by civic authorities or by the unstoppable course of nature. He had been healthy, in the bloom of life. She recognizes that he has staked his own life in order to lay his body with hers, as his final and defining deed: “What’s here? A cup clos’d in my true love’s hand? / Poison, I see, hath been his timeless end” (ll. 161–62). Thus, she does not mourn his death. Eschewing what she elsewhere calls “modern lamentation” (3.2.120), she refuses to see Romeo’s death as a loss to be passively suffered. Instead, she seeks through Romeo precisely what she had always sought: the freedom to claim her separation from him as her own: “O churl. Drunk all, and left no friendly drop / To help me after?” (5.3.163–64).

His lips are still warm. “Haply some poison yet doth hang on them” (l. 165). His body is not bloodied and appears unblemished by external injury. She might yet find a beautiful death in a long, slow kiss “to make me die with a restorative” (l. 166). The freedom of this happy end is marred only by the noise of the world’s stirring, which compels a quicker consummation through penetration (“O happy dagger” [l. 167]). We wish for her not a longer life, but a more leisurely dying.

XIV

Death, lie thou there, by a dead man interr’d.
—5.3.87

Neither Romeo nor Juliet acknowledges the other’s death by caring for the other’s dead body. Without denying death’s finality, they avoid grief and mourning. Instead, each responds immediately by consciously, even joyfully and happily, committing suicide. “How oft when men are at the point of death / Have they been merry!” (5.3.88–89). How is this to be explained?

By responding to the course of nature in a nonnatural (let us say “human”) fashion, funerary rites enact the minimum conditions for a human community. Beginning with the ancient family or tribe, the community is organized by the nonnatural practices (like naming or burial) through which it accounts for the natural facts (like births and deaths) that are its unavoidable conditions. Such practices must be “ritualized” and performed by successive generations. Only

47 It is not clear how Romeo interprets the cause of Juliet’s death. I assume that he does not hear Paris’s remark at the tomb, which attributes Juliet’s death to “grief” for Tybalt (5.3.50). Given his own search for poison, it is tempting to conclude that Romeo understands her death to have been a suicide by ingestion. Perhaps he understands the motive for Juliet’s suicide to have been her betrothal to Paris, which he mentions under his breath as he enters the vault: “What said my man, when my betossed soul / Did not attend him, as we rode? I think / He told me Paris should have married Juliet.” (ll. 76–78).
in the performance of such duties do individual family members belong to one
another. Human customs are revisable. But revisions in our practices take place
only through the repetition or transmission that gives them their ritual status.

To belong to a human community is to be bound to certain practices, per-
haps the most irrevocable of which are funerary rites, since without customary
practices by which to affirm the belonging of a dead individual to the intergen-
erational life of the community, there can be no inheritable community. Con-
versely, without an inheritable community—that is, without the repeatable acts
by which that community is instituted and maintained—no “human” life would
be possible; again, by “human life” we can mean only lives that are recognized as
such by a community, through its ritual practices.

To be mourned is perhaps the fullest, most abiding form of human recogni-
tion. An individual attains her full humanity, her full belonging to the “human”
community only by having her dead body mourned and cared for by the com-

munity. By the same token, to be left unburied, unmourned, is to be forsaken
by the community, abandoned absolutely. This means that the natural fact of
death, the “given” mortality of individual lives, is an external necessity without
which there can be no human belonging. For there to be any inheritable human
community, our final separation from each another must remain something that
we suffer, or acknowledge as such—it cannot appear as the consequence of our
own doing.

In his reflections on these matters, Hegel adds several striking qualifica-
tions. Hegel describes death as a natural course wherein an individual’s life, with all
of its unpredictable twists and turns, finally “concentrates . . . into a single com-
pleted shape” and falls into the “calm of simple universality,” the repose of death.

Death appears as a process whereby the particular “individual” is folded into the
“universality” of natural processes (worms, decay, and so on).

Whence, a profound worry: because “Nature” has no “movement of con-
sciousness,” the natural processes that absorb the individual appear to reduce
conscious life to a moment of biological necessity—say, to the feeding of
microbes. As Hegel points out, such a reduction is utterly intolerable to con-
scious beings, because it entails admitting either that “Nature herself” under-
takes the conscious action of destroying the individual, or that there are no
conscious actions. Obviously, to admit either of these conclusions is to utterly
erode any claim for freedom and self-realization. As Hegel puts it, “the move-
ment of consciousness” must assert itself by “interrupting the work of Nature

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48 For an elaboration of this thought, in relation to contemporary contexts, see two recent
books by Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (New York: Verso, 2004), and *Frames of War* (New York:
Verso, 2009).

49 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 270, paragraph 452.
and rescuing the [dead individual] from destruction; or better . . . it takes on itself the act of destruction." We stave off the natural forces that destroy the individual (by embalming or special garments) in order to accomplish that destruction for ourselves (by burial or cremation).

But—and here is the point to be underlined—the work of Nature can only be interrupted and taken over by the deeds of the community. In Hegel’s account, it is the task of the family—not of free agents lacking communal ties—to bury the dead. An individual can act on behalf of the family but cannot accomplish the ritual without the justification provided by a community beyond herself. As Hegel explains, the reason for this is the necessity with which we began: the sheer fact of individuals’ mortality. In the absence of an ongoing community of the living and the dead, nothing can prevent an individual’s life from appearing to belong wholly and finally to nature. If conscious life is to assert itself, it must do so through the ritual actions that constitute the intergenerational life of the community.

With all of this in mind, we can come closer to understanding why Romeo and Juliet did not perform any funerary rite for one another—and at the same time bring more fully into view a struggle for freedom that Hegel and others seem not to have acknowledged. Because Romeo is banished and Juliet estranges herself from her family by means of the ruse, they could not act on behalf of any community. Romeo still “belongs” to the Montague clan, which mourns him after his death. But he could not care for Juliet’s body as a Montague, given that she has already been buried in the Capulet tomb. In effect, each has already “died” to the community to which they belonged. (Recall Romeo’s frequent declarations that his “banishment” is “death, mistermd” [3.3.20–21]). Therefore, they could respond to the other’s death only with a deed expressing no aim higher than their own. Neither performs any act of mourning.

At the same time, their inability to “interrupt the work of nature” by taking on “the act of destruction” does not mean that the lovers’ lives are thereby reduced to the mere course of biological necessity. In fact, neither sees the other as simply abandoned to the relentless work of nature. This is precisely what Romeo and Juliet manage, through their quick and self-conscious actions, to avoid: “Well, Juliet I will lie with thee tonight. / Let’s see for means” (5.1.34–35). Each succeeds in seeing in the other’s deceased body not the calm, cold repose of death—rigor mortis or the foul stench of decay—but an individual warmth and vitality of which each has intimate and singular knowledge. The claims of nature and human society are flouted. Romeo’s lips are still warm and supple to the kiss; his body’s integrity is undiminished by spilled blood. And Juliet?

Romeo apparently makes good on his promise to inter Paris “in a triumphant grave” (5.3.83) but only after slaying him. He buries Paris as his murderer, not his kinsman.
O my love, my wife,
Death that has suck’d the honey of thy breath
Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty.
Thou art not conquer’d. Beauty’s ensign yet
Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks,
And Death’s pale flag is not advanced there.

(5.3.91–96)

Romeo and Juliet are not the passive beneficiaries of good timing. Rather, as the audience knows, this moment is the result of the lovers’ own acts, the purposeful ingestion of unnatural substances, the unwavering resolve with which each commits suicide in the other’s embrace. The lovers assert their freedom and “the movement of consciousness” through deeds that can have no communal justification, no social explanation. No community could justify or explain their actions. In their suicides, the lovers show the community’s most sacred duties to be mere empty formalities. They shine a harsh light on the frigid ceremony of the family tomb, and stain “The stony entrance of this sepulchre” with “blood” (II. 141, 140).

And yet we communally venerate the lovers’ actions—in our drama, in our poetry, in desire for the myth. In part, this is because we mistakenly offer this veneration as a memorialization of the lovers’ belonging to a “different” community, to one another, a single pair. Like the families, we allow them to remain interred together, sharing a funerary moment, entwined forever in a tale of woe: “Romeo and Juliet.” But in venerating their struggle as a kind of Liebestod, we mistake these individuals for a single pair. That is, we treat the “pair” as would treat any individual member of our community. The two suicides are treated as if they were one death, for the care of which Capulet and Montague will be reconciled as brothers.

By treating them as one, we forget that they were not a united “pair” but two separate individuals. We mistake their separate suicides for a single death and confuse the active individuation of the lovers with the eternal being of a single pair.51 To see this mistake is to confront the fact that there is no ritual practice by which the community can respond to the free, separate actions of individuals. The community, as we have seen, asserts its “movement of consciousness” only in response to natural facts, not conscious deeds.52

51 Note that the families and civic authorities speak only of the young lovers’ deaths, not their suicides. As Lady Capulet says, “O me! This sight of death is as a bell / That warns my old age to a sepulchre” (5.3.205–6).

52 Hegel makes this point when he notes that the family’s duty emerges in response not to a deed but to a state of “pure being, death,” “a state which has been reached immediately, in the course of Nature, not the result of an action consciously done.” See Phenomenology of Spirit, 270, paragraph 452.
How, then, might we be more faithful to the free, self-conscious acts of the lovers? How might we reenact the lovers’ suicides and more fully grasp their significance for us? Romeo and Juliet, we said, do not deny the fact or finality of death. Rather, they refuse to regard mortality—our absolute separateness—as an external power, as the fact that we cannot outlive one another. From the drama’s perspective, each outlives the other’s death. Both Romeo and Juliet see one another dead. Thus, the objective reality upon which the inheritable, human community is founded loses its objective status. Or, better, the objective fact of human separateness—the cold, grim power of “unsubstantial Death”—is defied by the subjective aims of the lovers.

Shall I believe
That unsubstantial Death is amorous,
And that the lean abhorred monster keeps
Thee here in dark to be his paramour?
For fear of that I still will stay with thee,
And never from this palace of dim night
Depart again.

(ll. 102–8)

Even in dying, their final deeds, they discover an occasion for their active individualization. Death—the last God, the natural font of the communal spirit—is usurped by the purposeful actions of lovers who embrace their final separation as their own.

Eyes, look your last.
Arms, take your last embrace! And lips, O you
The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss
A dateless bargain to engrossing Death.

(ll. 112–15)

For Romeo and Juliet, falling in love has brought the realization that they are neither bound to, nor separated from, one another by any “third” power—nature, mortality, family enmity, or civic norms. While these external powers did individuate them for others—as family members or citizens or individual bodily creatures—these powers are not, they come to realize, the substance of their love. They experience freedom and self-realization as lovers, not only by negating these powers—to the point of taking their lives—but in the acts of mutual self-recognition that this negation makes possible. These acts, including their suicides, constitute their love affair, the dawning realization that nothing,

53 Jacques Derrida’s essay on Romeo and Juliet makes the same observation without, however, developing it. See “Aphorism, Countertime” in Philosophers on Shakespeare (n. 21 above), 174–75.
not even mortality, separates or individuates us absolutely, and that we must actively claim our separateness if our life is to be our own.

Rather than the sad story of two individuals whose desire to be together is both formed and thwarted by “A greater power than we can contradict” (l. 153), we see the tragic story of two individuals who enact their separate individuality, their own freedom, the only way that they can—through one another, even in the act of dying.