*Romeo and Juliet,* the story of "star-crossed" love, is so well and so deeply rooted in a number of traditions—those of myth, legend, folklore, novella, to name a few—that to present it as a subversive play may appear paradoxical and perhaps even perverse. Yet the play's main polarities that explore the frictions between high and low spheres, public and private lives, age and youth, authority and rebellion, sacred and secular love, generate powerful whirls of energy that partly account for its enduring fascination for world audiences.

To the ebullient atmosphere of erotic drives that is released by the prospect of marriage, by music, dancing, and masquing, as well as by the flares of torches at night and the dog days of early summer in Verona, one must surely add the numerous language games, puns, innuendoes, and paradoxes whose main source is Mercutio, the play's lord of misrule. These witty language games and conceits are all part of a tradition (rhetorical tropes, Petrarchan codes, sonneteering conventions) as well as of the subversion of this tradition. *Romeo and Juliet* introduces us into a world upside down where the ordinary rules—whether they be syntactical, social, or sexual—are temporarily lifted or brushed aside. The violence of the civil brawls is reflected in the violence of the language or rather in the violence imposed upon language. The very genre of the play—a love tragedy—is itself a subversion of tragedy since the first two acts correspond to the structure of Shakespearean comedy until Mercutio is turned into a "grave man," thus causing the play to veer off into tragedy. Gender is also subverted, as Shakespeare plays at presenting an active, almost masculine Juliet against a weak, effeminate Romeo.

The law is subverted by a love that brings about a destabilization of domestic order, thus leading to a world where contraries are reconciled in a series of sublime or grotesque conjunctions (high and low, hate and love, the sacred and the profane, life and death) so as to create a series of discordant fusions. Shakespeare is here influenced by Marlowe, whose heterodox approach to life and love, repeatedly stressed in his plays, allowed the pagan mysteries to displace or subvert the traditional Christian values that were then regarded as the foundation of public order and of household peace.

Young Shakespeare seems to have delighted in delineating the ravages of misrule, of the hurly-burly of love and desire, in a traditional aristocratic society dominated by custom, patriarchy, and well-established wealth.1 Festivity is not limited to orchestrating the coming of age in Verona or the various rites of passage for young men and women, but it also serves to turn the world upside down, to subvert its rigid hierarchies. United with the subversive power of love, festivity does not only achieve a temporary suspension of social rules and political authority, but it also leads to a radical questioning of traditional patriarchal order.

Following on the dense, syntactically complex and highly contorted sonnet prologue, we are thrust *in medias res* into the verbal sparrings of the two Capulet servants, Sampson and Gregory (1.1.1-30). Theirs is a stichomythic exchange depending on linguistic thrust and parry, on a quick succession of quibbles: *colliers*—*choler*—*collar;* of antithesis and paradox: *move*—*stand.* Although this is unquestionably a type of demotic language that foreshadows the future banter between Romeo and Mercutio (what the latter calls the "wild-goose chase" in 2.4.72), it remains both vivacious and entertaining and serves to strike the keynote, one of aggressive virility and unabashed phallicism, at the outset of the play.2

Before going further I should also remark that, on stage, the servants' appearance creates an impression of rapid movements, intense agitation, and a great expenditure of youthful male energy. Sampson and Gregory use a number of telling gestures while they speak to denote outrage, provocation, insult, or mockery; and their mode of expression also depends on body language. So expressions like "we'll draw" (1.1.3), "to stand" (1.8), "women are ever thrust to the wall" (lines 14-15), "'tis known I am a pretty piece of flesh" (line 28), "draw thy tool" (line 30), are all accompanied by specific gestures, some of them probably quite obscene and using all the possibilities offered by the costumes and properties of the set (in particular the bulging codpieces so conspicuous on Renaissance male apparel). So, this mixture of verbal aggressiveness and of "macho" pride (the flaunting of sexual virility traditionally identified with the implements of fight with expressions like "stand" or "tool") has elements of clowning as well as of youth culture with its martial rites that find expression in street brawls as well as in carnival games.3 This is a sample of what Peter Burke has called "blue-apron culture,"4 which found expression in riots or on various festive occasions, something quite reminiscent of the French *Sociétés Joyeuses* or "Abbeys of Misrule" described by Natalie Davis.5 The play thus opens on a combination of popular culture, joyful anarchy, and sexual bravado, an index to festive license or mass rebellion as in the Jack Cade scenes in *2 Henry VI.*

We find here a string of gruesome puns on "cutting off the heads of the maids" (lines 22-23) amounting to taking their "maidenheads," a style of wordplay already found in *2 Henry VI* in a dialogue between Jack Cade and Dick the Butcher (4.7.121-23). In *2 Henry VI* this was followed by the savage farce of showing the heads of Lord Say and his son-in-law, Sir James Cromer, on top of long pikes and then in having them kiss one another in some sinister puppet show. This bloody spectacle may be construed as the unmetaphoring6 of the latent brutality of the sexual punning (4.7.124-25), and one is reminded of Lavinia's rape and mutilation in *Titus Andronicus.* In the latter, as in the history play, verbal violence is followed by acts of sadism and cruelty that take the form of bloody farce and savagery. In *Romeo and Juliet* subversion is apparently less radical since, on the surface at least, it remains confined to speech patterns and to a series of provoking postures.7

Yet if we think of Juliet's ominous threat, "… Nurse, I'll to my wedding bed, / And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead" (3.2.136-37) or of old Capulet's lament in 4.5, when his daughter is discovered apparently dead on the morning of her marriage to Paris, we may see an interesting underground connection between the initial jokes and the belated accomplishment of Juliet's fate:

O son, the night before thy wedding day  
Hath Death lain with thy wife. There she lies,  
*Flower as she was, deflowered by him.*  
Death is my son-in-law, Death is my heir.  
My daughter he hath wedded.…  
                  *(4.5.35-39; emphasis mine)*

This association between defloration and death had also been anticipated by Juliet's own fantasies when she said to Friar Laurence:

O, bid me leap, rather than marry Paris,  
From off the battlements of any tower,  
Or walk in thievish ways, or bid me lurk  
Where serpents are. Chain me with roaring  
 bears,  
Or hide me nightly in a charnel-house  
*O 'ercover 'd quite with dead men's rattling  
  bones,*  
With reeky shanks and yellow chapless skulls.  
                   *(4.1.77-83; emphasis mine)*

These are not only words, as the initial sinister images are acted out in the play's final scene when, after a last kiss to the dead Romeo, Juliet kills herself with a dagger and exclaims:

                            O happy dagger.  
This is thy sheath. There rust, and let me die.  
                                   (5.3.167-68)

The act of suicide is a perversion of the act of love since the phallic dagger (Gregory's "tool") is allowed to penetrate Juliet's "sheath," a word that is used instead of the more technical term "scabbard," which is also the exact English translation of the Latin *vagina.* More farfetched but no less intriguing is the possible Latin pun on head/*caput* that refers us directly to the name Capulet, so that the word "maidenhead" could already be an indirect allusion to the play's heroine—Juliet Capulet.8 This type of linguistic juggling, combining two separate signifiers ("head" and "maid") into a component whole ("maidenhead") that radically alters the initial meaning (from cruelty to sexuality) while opening up metaphorical perspectives used later in the play, is an illustration of a form of linguistic subversion characterizing low comedy.

Another example of these subversive language games may be found in the Nurse's soliloquy in 1.3, when she refers to her teeth and exclaims:

           … I'll lay *fourteen* of my teeth—  
And yet, to my *teen* be it spoken, I have but  
 *four*—  
She's not fourteen.  
                         *(1.3.12-14; emphasis mine)*

A similar pun is found in the scene where Old Capulet is busy preparing the marriage festivities with Peter and the other servants:

*Cap.*                 —Sirrah, fetch drier logs!  
     Call Peter, he will show thee where they  
 are.  
*2 Ser.* I have a *head,* sir, that will find out  
  *logs* and never trouble Peter for the matter.  
*Cap.* Mass and well said! A merry whoreson,  
 ha.  
    Thou shalt be *loggerhead!*  
                      *(4.4.15-20; emphasis mine)*

This repeats the type of popular wordplay already indulged in by the servants, male or female, all of them part of the Capulet household, so that it may be regarded as a form of clannish mannerism; the various puns on the word "head" are also indirectly related to the name Capulet.

Such low-life linguistic *bricolage* has its counterpart in the rhetoric of the lovers that places such an emphasis on the oxymoron—the "pretty riddle," as Erasmus calls it.9 It conveys the extreme tension between polar opposites characterizing such a brief and intense experience, this "prodigious birth of love" where "[their] only love [is] sprung from [their] only hate" (1.5.137).

Contrary to the euphuistic dead language of Lady Capulet comparing Paris to a book (1.4.81-92) and in opposition to Old Capulet's cyclical vision of life and love (1.2.26-30), inscribed within an immemorial and universal tradition of succeeding generations that prompts him to cast a nostalgic backward glance on the lost pleasures of his youth ("Nay sit, nay sit, good cousin Capulet, / For you and I are past our dancing days … / Come Pentecost as quickly as it will, / Some five and twenty years: and then we masqu'd"—1.5.30-37), Romeo and Juliet's language of love seems closer to a "misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms" (1.1.177). The simultaneously rapturous and destructive experience of love at first sight, suggested in the French expression *le coup de foundre,* which associates sudden love with a flash of lightning, is rendered in the play's complex and ambivalent light and darkness imagery10 in repeated allusions to fire, powder, consummation, combustion, explosion, and also in the language of impetuous and rash speed (running, galloping, and so forth). The oxymoron, which can only be reduced, when used mechanically, to a string of dead images as in Romeo's pseudo-Petrarchan ejaculations in 1.1.174-79, "O brawling love, O loving hate … ," is bound to produce or to reflect an emotional shock; if antithesis may be defined as a strategy of opposition and paradox as a strategy of inversion, the oxymoron itself is based on a strategy of fusion.11 The ontology of the oxymoron is in fact close to the neoplatonic concept of *coincidentia oppositorum* as illustrated by Marsiglio Ficino in his commentary on Plato's *Symposium,* where he states that "Love is Desire aroused by Beauty":

Only by the vivifying rapture of *Amor* do the contraries of *Pulchritudo* and *Voluptas* become united: "Contradictoria coincidunt in natura uniali." But to achieve the perfect union of contraries, Love must face the Beyond; for as long as Love remains attached to the finite world, Passion and Beauty will continue to clash.12

An equivalent of this may be seen in some of the love images in the play that both contrast and collapse the opposite ideas of light and darkness, like Romeo's description of Juliet "As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear" (1.5.45) or Juliet's description of Romeo as "day in night" (3.2.17). Oddly enough, Puttenham calls this figure "the Crosse-couple" because "it takes [me] two contrary words, and tieth them as it were in a paire of couples, and so makes them agree like good fellowes."13 So the oxymoron, or "crosse-couple," should indeed be regarded as the emblematic trope of the "pair of star-crossed lovers."

But in the play's dialectics, love is a transcending force that disrupts and subverts the marriage strategies of the establishment but it is itself subverted by Mercutio's wit and by the Nurse's bawdy humor. In creating a multiplicity of perspectives, Shakespeare is able to view the central love story from conflicting and parallel lines and thus to deflate some of its potential pathos and sentimentality. Romanticism is pitted against the cynical view of love as sex, as an affair of a "poperin pear" in an "open arse" (2.1.38), as Mercutio crudely puts it. The voices of tradition and subversion are not one-sided in this play but constantly interact and reflect one another so that they oblige the spectator and the reader to resort to constant realignments of perspective. We find a similar dynamic at the level of social, sexual, and gender roles, as well as of ideological positions in general.

That the Nurse should be regarded as one of the strong voices of tradition in the play seems an undeniable fact. In her long rambling speech about Juliet's age in 1.3 she seems to be the keeper of family memory, reminiscing numerous details about Juliet's infancy and growth to childhood (her weaning, her standing "high lone," her falling forward). For her the past is safely contained within a double calendar—that of an old Celtic holiday *(Lugnasadh)* turned into the agricultural feast of Lammastide celebrating the beginning of harvest and the calendar of her own private memories, the death of her daughter Susan, the earthquake that surprised her while she was "sitting in the sun under the dove-house wall. …" If time is associated with the cycles of growth and coming of age, as in the traditional her discourse or pastoral notions of time in the Renaissance,14 her discourse remains predicated on a void, on the dark shadow of death that it simultaneously suggests and screens. It also betrays an insistence on and even an obsession with the body and bodily functions that combines sexuality and death. The Nurse's speech undermines itself since the counterdiscourse of sex and death progressively subverts the surface search for calendar landmarks, thereby destroying the happy remembrance of things past.

The Nurse's way of reckoning time is highly idiosyncratic. The main public event that she recaptures is the earthquake "eleven years before," a phrase she repeats several times. This event coincided with little Juliet's weaning, just before she turned three, an unusually late age for weaning a child, even by Elizabethan standards.15 This reconstruction of time past is achieved, as it were, by means of her own bodily geography. On several occasions she refers to her "dug" and "nipple" (lines 26, 30, 31, 32), just as earlier she had jokingly mentioned her teeth to count Juliet's age. At this juncture one is reminded of the poetic *blason*—that is, the metonymic game consisting of describing and heraldizing the female body, or rather its naughty parody, the *contreblason,* which both belong to the tradition started by the French poet Clément Marot.16 Indeed, the Nurse relies on this particular part of her old and ugly body (her sagging breasts or "dugs," otherwise emblematic of her trade) as a piece of evidence to date one particular episode.17 In spite of the apparent disorder and random associations of her soliloquy,18 she resorts to *loci memoriae* while her own *ars memorativa* associates past events with bodily pictures. Indeed, hers is an instinctive memory system that works as *memoria rerum or rather as memoria corporis.*19 The wearing of Juliet and the earthquake are a miniature drama encapsulated within her brain ("I do bear a brain," line 29) that she is physically reexperiencing on the stage as she is telling her story. The scene begins as a picture of "childhood recollected in tranquillity" until the idle, lazy "sitting in the sun under the dove-house wall" (line 27) suddenly quickens into life when the "pretty fool" grows tetchy and falls out with the dug; then the wall shakes with the earthquake, thus obliging the Nurse to "trudge." This gentle, peaceful action appears in strong contrast to Gregory's thrusting the "maids to the wall" (1.1.16). The uncomfortable association of the earthquake and of domestic bliss is accompanied by the darker note of the evocation of the dead figures of Susan and of her "merry" husband. The Nurse's incongruous animation of the dovehouse ("'Shake!' quoth the dovehouse," 1.3.34), a pathetic fallacy combined with *hysteron proteron,* a trope inverting the order of cause and effect, may also be interpreted as just another way of evoking the "shaking of the sheets" in the "love-house." Besides being very common rhymes, love and dove are almost interchangeable words in poetry and Romeo does call Juliet a "snowy dove" when he first sees her (1.5.47); moreover, the traditional Renaissance interconnections between micro- and macrocosm made the earthquake a possible image for the tremors of the belly and of the lower bodily parts. So the reawakening of dead or dormant memories is first and foremost a means or an excuse for the Nurse to bring back to life her extinct sexual life so as to retrieve the happy time when her husband was still of this world. If the sexual allusion is transferred to young Juliet, as may seem appropriate since the business at hand is, after all, her prospective marriage, it can also be understood as an expression of the Nurse's nostalgia for her own married life, now dead and gone with her husband's body.

Indeed, the correspondences between the little world of man and nature's macrocosm made it possible to establish a series of links and analogies between bodily parts, the four elements, and the planets. In this view the earth was quite logically associated with the lower parts so that an earthquake could be interpreted in a sexual or scatological manner as, for instance, in Hotspur's sarcastic remarks to Glendower in *1 Henry IV:*

Diseased nature oftentimes breaks forth  
In strange eruptions, oft the teeming earth  
Is with a kind of colic pinch'd and vex'd  
By the imprisoning of unruly wind  
Within her womb, which, for enlargement  
 striving  
Shakes the old beldame earth, and topples  
 down  
Steeples and moss-grown towers. At your  
 birth  
Our grandam earth, having this distemp'rature,  
In passion shook.…  
                                  (3.1.26-34)

Hotspur is here bent on sending down the mad pretensions of the Welsh magus but this piece of "Bakhtinian grotesque" reveals that the eruptions of nature were also popularly construed as the release of an unruly wind contained within the womb of "our grandam earth." Scatological allusions being, if one may say so, next door to sexual innuendo, the allusion to the earthquake may be regarded as a kind of double entendre that the gestures of the actress playing the part of the Nurse can always make quite explicit on stage.

In *The Comedy of Errors,* Shakespeare had already developed a string of comic analogies between the female anatomy of Nell, the kitchen wench, and European geography,20 an idea followed up in *The Purple Island, or the Isle of Man* (1633) by Phineas Fletcher, where the human figure merges into the landscape and the landscape is made to look like a human body,21 a double conceit that is a verbal equivalent of the art of the "curious perspective" or anamorphosis.

The Nurse's soliloquy can thus be read as a verbal anamorphosis of her own body, where the travel into "the dark backward and abysm of time"22 provides her with an opportunity to retrieve the map of her female anatomy with its periodic fluxes and shakings.23 Such powerful corporeal presence is also a screen for an absence and a palimpsest that points to the shadow of death underneath. When one uses the method of "backward reckoning," which seems to have been common practice in the religious and judicial worlds as well as in the popular culture of early modern Europe,24 one realizes that the reference to "Lammaseve at night" (31 July) takes us back to the probable date of Juliet's conception, nine months earlier, which corresponds to the night of Hallowe'en (31 October), when the souls of the dead were believed to be roaming about. The Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg has described these Hallowe'en superstitions as the offshoots of a vast corpus of European beliefs in the night battles waged between the living and the dead or between the night walkers, or *benandanti* (children born with a caul and thus with a sign of their gift), and bands of nocturnal demons spreading sterility and death:

The nocturnal ridings of the women following Diana's cult are no doubt a variant of the 'wild hunt' … Diana-Hecate is indeed herself followed in her night peregrinations by a group of disquieted dead souls—the premature dead, children having died in infancy, people having died violent deaths.… 25

So even if it is subdued and if it only briefly surfaces in the Nurse's monologue, this association of wintry barrenness and fruition (Lammas and Hallowe'en), of "birthday and deathday,"26 of breast-feeding, weaning, and burying ("falling backward" is an expression that links copulation and death, a possible proleptic suggestion of Juliet's "death" on the very morning of her marriage to Paris) is both paradoxical and typical of the play's alliance of contraries.

On closer examination, the image of the weaning of Juliet with the laying of wormwood on the dug, which uses what Gail Paster describes as "the aversion technique,"27 may probably be regarded as a subliminal foreshadowing of Juliet's desperate attempt in the end, when she tries to suck the last drops of poison from Romeo's lips and exclaims:

Poison, I see, hath been his timeless end.  
O churl. Drunk all, and left no friendly drop  
To help me after? I will kiss thy lips.  
Haply some poison yet doth hang on them  
To make me die with a restorative.  
                                (5.3.162-166)

The Nurse's smearing her breast with wormwood, a proverbially bitter oil used to discourage the child from breastfeeding, also reinforces the motif of death insofar as the prefix "worm" also looks forward to Mercutio's curse after the fight against Tybalt—"A plague o' both your houses, / They have made *worms ' meat* of me" (3.1.109; emphasis mine), and to Romeo's lurid evocation of "worms that are [Juliet's] chambermaids" (5.3.109), both announcing Hamlet's irreverent epitaph for Polonius:

*King* Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?

*Ham.* At supper.

*King* At supper? Where?

*Ham.* Not where he eats, but where 'a is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but to one table—that's the end.

*King* Alas, alas!

*Ham.* A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

*King* What dost thou mean by this?

*Ham.* Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.

(4.3.16-31)

Hamlet's sardonic humor is here at its most savage as it presents an image of royal festivity, of going "a progress" through the empty stomachs and the "guts" of the populace. This is more than the traditional *memento mori* or than the description of death as the great leveler. This provocative vision of a world upside down is a caveat to Claudius, a direct challenge to his authority, a veiled death threat associated to grim apocalyptic visions of social revenge in the form of latter-day cannibalism using the worms as proxies. In the case of *Romeo and Juliet,* things are far from being so clear, and the subversive elements in the Nurse's defense of tradition and memory can only appear through the work of retrospective interpretation (like the Nurse's own serpentine anamnesis) once the play's sequence of unlucky events has been disclosed and the theme of the triumph of death has taken over on the triumph of love. Shakespeare resorts to the power of language and imagery to prepare the audience for the idea and the spectacle of the gradual fusion of eros and thanatos.

Indeed, the reference to the earthquake has the function of a dark saturnalia: it combines the ideas of the dance of sex and of the dance of death and it rolls into one the impressions of catastrophe and ecstasy (other images for this are images of the flash of lightning, of the meteor, or allusions to the myth of Phaeton). Like the Nurse's insistence on her own body, this combination of sexuality and death, of joy and mourning, is a recognizable feature of the grotesque mode with its specific mixture of humor and horror28 and its foregrounding of bodily organs and bodily functions. This ambivalence is analyzed by Bakhtin in what he calls "grotesque realism":

Degradation and debasement of the higher do not have a formal and relative character in grotesque realism. "Upward" and "downward" have here an absolute and strictly topographical meaning. "Downward" is earth, "upward" is heaven. Earth is an element that devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time an element of birth, of renascence (the maternal breasts),… To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defection and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one.29

The conversion from festival to funeral, therefore, does not only concern Juliet's planned marriage rites. The play negotiates a constant to and fro movement from mirth to lament and vice versa until it becomes itself a dramatic equivalent of Peter's "merry dump" (4.5.105).

Another example of the subversion of the ordinary opposition between life and death may be found in the scene where Juliet is discovered dead on the morning of her marriage to Count Paris. The hysterical nature and the hyperbolic artificiality of the collective lamentations orchestrated by the Nurse and articulated by Old Capulet have often been rightly pointed out. This is all the more visible as the audience knows that Juliet is not actually dead, so that all emotion is drained of the lament and mourning is turned into a hollow performance. As Thomas Moisan writes:

Shakespeare deliberately undercuts the rhetoric of grief in this scene to underscore, by contrast, the more genuine emotions of Romeo and Juliet … the ululant effusions of the mourners, with their "0"-reate apostrophes and expletives undeleted … are too "high" and "tragic" for a death that has not actually occurred, while the punning *badinage* between Peter and the musicians is too "low" and "comic" for a death that is *supposed* to have occurred.…30

So when Paris expresses his grief by exclaiming,

Beguil'd, divorced, wronged, spited, slain.  
Most detestable Death, by thee beguil'd,  
By cruel, cruel thee quite overthrown  
                                    (4.5.55-58)

he follows suit and amplifies Capulet's most vocal lamentation but he also unwittingly reveals that Romeo, who has taken Juliet away from him and married her in secret, is now identified with the figure of Death. He had already been recognized as such by Tybalt during the masque scene in 1.5, when the latter had described him as "cover'd with an antic face" (the word *antic,* as *Richard II* reveals, was a traditional name for death).31 So, among the play's supreme ironies and successive reversals we discover that the two rivals for Juliet's love, both unknown to each other, are allowed to be cheated and defeated by a false death. This is the result of Friar Laurence's unfortunate attempt to simulate death to preserve life, which led him to a dangerous transgression with unforeseen consequences.

The subversion of the border between life and death at the initiative of figures that seem hallmarked by tradition and experience follows another subversion, namely that of gender roles in the play. This appears when Romeo compares Juliet with the sun in the "balcony" scene:

But soft, what light through younder window  
 breaks?  
It is the east and Juliet is the sun!  
Arise fair sun and kill the envious moon  
Who is already sick and pale with grief  
That thou her maid art far more fair than she.  
                                     (2.2.2.-6)

Juliet is placed above him and Romeo hears her from below, unseen in the dark. He is thus spatially dominated by Juliet and this places him in an inferior, passive position, later acknowledged by Romeo himself when he describes the situation in terms of the mystic adoration of a saint:

O speak again bright angel, for thou art  
As glorious to this night, being *o'er my head,*  
As is a winged messenger of heaven  
Unto the white-upturned wondering eyes  
Of mortals that fall back to gaze on *him*  
When he bestrides the lazy-puffing clouds  
And sails upon the bosom of the air.  
                   *(2.2.26-32; emphasis mine)*

Juliet, compared to an angel, is made explicitly masculine here, riding the clouds in the air like the incubus Queen Mab in Mercutio's description "the hag, when maids lie on their backs, / That presses them and learns them first to bear" (1.5.92-93).32 Furthermore, Romeo is said to be "fishified" by love—that is, emasculated: Mercutio says that he has lost his "roe" and compares him to a "dried herring," an image evoking Lenten fare (2.4.38-39). After Mercutio's death, Romeo will indeed exclaim:

                O sweet Juliet,  
Thy beauty hath made me effeminate  
                               (3.1.115-16)

Critics have also noted that it is Juliet who is allowed to speak the prothalamic soliloquy in 3.2 ("Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds"), thus reversing the traditional sexual roles, since the prothalamion was traditionally sung by the bridegroom on the eve of the marriage night. This detail adds to Juliet's self-confidence, turning her into what a critic has called an "atypical, unblushing, eager bride."33 The last line of the play, which reverses the order of the appearance of the heroes in the title—"For never was a story of more woe / Than this of Juliet and *her* Romeo"—making Romeo the one who belongs to Juliet rather than the other way around, cannot only express the necessities of the rhyme. It also confirms the subversion of traditional sexual relations and the taking over of initiative and authority by Juliet in the field of love and sex.

The love between the two children of enemy families leads to a reversal of ordinary social and sexual roles and to the subversion of the borders between life and death. The initial transgression lies in the love at first sight experienced during the masque at old Capulet's house, and it will subsequently defeat all the plans worked out by the traditional forces and voices of authority in the play (parents, confessor, Nurse). Paradoxically, the speeches that remind us of times past, of grave customs and ancient power, are laden with ironical foreboding of the inevitable transgression and subversion of tradition that will be allowed to take place. The subversion of life by death is itself an old idea found in morality plays, and it is mainly due to its being placed in a Renaissance context and applied to a pair of young and innocent lovers that it may be regarded as sensational or shocking. More intriguing is the ambiguous game played with the idea and the gruesome representation of death itself, which is responsible for the creation of horror with a sort of morbid, pre-Gothic or even Poesque thrill.34 The repeated occurrences of the normally rather rare figure of the oxymoron serve to "define the carnal knowledge of a love in which life and death intertwine"35 and this macabre representation is given pride of place, often with a highly visual emphasis, in important soliloquies (4.3.15-58 and 5.3.75-120).

But this simultaneous expression and subversion of *amour passion* and of Petrarchan love lyrics also corresponds to a particular aspect of the artistic sensibility of the Northern European Renaissance, in a *topos* known as that of the encounter between the Maiden and Death, often found in the works of German artists such as Hans Baldung Grien, Samuel Beham, or Peter Flötner. In this macabre iconography, where a perverse erotic touch is added to the representation of the young woman's naked body, the painters gave birth to a pre-Mannerist *memento mori,* just another melancholy and disturbing variation on the traditional theme of *Vanitas?*36 Since another of Dürer's disciples, the German painter Hans Holbein, worked for a long time in England, it is quite possible that this Continental motif reached London and the theatrical circles where Shakespeare was working, giving him the idea of a dramatic transposition of these images so as to lend more power to Arthur Brooke's moralizing poem, which he was otherwise using as his main source.

Tradition in *Romeo and Juliet* is certainly seen as a constraint that reduces the freedom of the individuals,37 obliging them to follow the inherited hatreds of the clannish feud, "the continuance of their parents' rage," as the sonnet Prologue puts it, rather than gratify their own inclinations. On the other hand, the importance or the precedence given to tradition also implies that there is an obligation inherent in ceremony, a respect due to the laws of hospitality that, for instance, leads Old Capulet to curb Tybalt's fury when he recognizes Romeo hiding behind his "antic face" in the ball scene (1.5.53-91).

But Shakespeare treats the whole relation in a more complex, dialectic manner, as tradition in the play combines order and disorder, discipline and disobedience (to the Prince and to the laws of Verona). Moreover, characters like the Nurse and the Friar, who represent the voices of tradition, engage in soliloquies full of subversive potential. Their various attitudes and actions in the play also favor the clandestine resistance of the lovers to their family traditions. Does not Friar Laurence, after all, go far beyond the allowed limits of the church tradition and of his own responsibility as a holy man when he tampers with the forces of life and death and allows Juliet to "continue two and forty hours" in a "borrow'd likeness of shrunk death" (4.2.105-6)? Mercutio is also a highly ambiguous figure who embodies the traditional cynicism of young men's festive societies while simultaneously allowing the darker forces of dream, desire, and death to haunt his eerie Queen Mab soliloquy (1.4.53-94).

By contrasting and combining the voices of tradition and the forces of subversion in his early love tragedy, Shakespeare was in fact still experimenting with the power of dramatic art. Even if the influence of Marlowe is still very much felt in this play, the lovers pay a heavy price in the end and they cannot be said to be "overreachers" like Tamburlaine or Doctor Faustus. They do not set out to conquer the world or engage in black arts and in the quest of forbidden knowledge. They do not pay for their own sins only (impatience, anger, and revolt) or for their own blindness or naiveté, but they are also the victims of the subversive forces let loose by some of the other characters in the play (the Nurse, Mercutio, and Friar Laurence). Their love heroism is certainly misguided and vulnerable, as the recurrent imagery of the tempest-tossed or pilotless ship suggests,38 but it also reflects the contradictions and clashes in Verona's patriarchal system as well as those inside the world of desire itself.

In the last analysis, their death is the sign of a triumph of sterility over the hope for continuity and regeneration, since it is not the old who die in the play, as tradition and natural laws would have it, but mainly the young (Mercutio, Tybalt, Paris, Romeo, and Juliet). The golden statues raised by the parents to commemorate the two eponymous heroes in the end are a sad and painful tribute, a mourning monument built to remind future generations of the dangers of civil strife and of the triumph of tradition over individual desire with its subversive potential. But, as the play itself plainly shows, this Pyrrhic victory is just another name for disaster since it is achieved at considerable expense, that of the sacrifice of the young and of the forces of life and renewal.

**Notes**

1 In a study of the early plays, Alexander Leggati pits Shakespeare's well-known "sense of control" (as illustrated by the tightly knit structure of *A Midsummer Night's Dream)* against what he rightly calls "a fascination with the anarchic" (Alexander Leggati, *English Drama: Shakespeare to the Restoration, 1590-1660* [London: Longman, 1988], 31).

2 According to Valerie Traub in *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama* (London: Routledge, 1992), "each space of transcendent love is ultimately shown to be contained within, and even invaded by, the dominant ideology and effects of masculine violence," 2. Joseph A. Porter insists on the resemblances between Marlowe and the character of Mercutio and writes that "the opening of *Romeo and Juliet* with Sampson and Gregory talking of thrusting maids to the wall … is the most relentlessly phallic opening in all of Shakespeare's plays" ("Marlowe, Shakespeare and the Canonization of Heterosexuality," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88 [Winter 1989]: 134).

3 See François Laroque, *Shakespeare's Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage* (1991); reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 209-10.

4 Peter Burke, "Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century London," in *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England,* ed. Barry Reay (1985; reprint, London: Routledge, 1988), 32. See also

5 See Natalie Davis, "The Reasons of Misrule," in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1965; reprint, Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1975), 97-123 and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Le carnaval de Romans* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 249-50, 326-28, 356.

6 I am here using Rosalie Colie's concept for the deliberate transposition of a conventional stylistic figure to the reality presented on the stage in *Shakespeare's Living Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 11. In an early tragedy like *Titus Andronicus,* gruesome puns on bodily mutilation and sexual defloration through rape become literally true when they are acted on stage.

7 The first scene of the play would certainly fit in with C. L. Barber's formula (to describe Cade's rebellion) of a "consistent expression of anarchy by clowning" *(Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959], 13). In this connection, see François Laroque, "The Jack Cade Scenes Reconsidered: Rebellion, Utopia, or Carnival?" in *Shakespeare and Cultural Traditions: The Selected Proceedings of the International Shakespeare Association World Congress, Tokyo, 1991,* eds. Tetsuo Kishi, Roger Pringle, and Stanley Wells (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994), 76-89.

8 In this connection, see Pierre Iselin, "'What shall I swear by?' Langue et idolâtrie dans *Romeo and Juliet,"* in *Romeo et Juliette: Nouvelles perspectives critiques,* eds. Jean-Marie Maguin and Charles Whitworth (Montpellier: Collection Astraea, Imprimerie de Recherche, 1993) 174.

9 See Marjorie Donker, *Shakespeare's Proverbial Themes: A Rhetorical Context for the Sententia as Res* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1992), 31.

10 See Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare 's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (1935; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 310-16, and François Laroque, "'Cover'd with an Antic Face': les masques de la lumière et de l'ombre dans *Romeo and Juliet," Études Anglaises,* no. 4 (October-December 1992): 385-95.

11 See Gilles Mathis, "'L'obscure clarté' de *Roméo et Juliette:* les parades du langage," in *Roméo et Juliette: Nouvelles perspectives critiques, e* d. Maguin and Whitworth, 243.

12 Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (1958; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 46-47, 54-56.

13 Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker, eds., *The Arte of English Poesie* (1598; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), 216.

14 See Laroque, *Shakespeare's Festive World,* 74-76. See also

15 See G. Blakemore Evans, *Romeo and Juliet,* The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 198-99.

16 See François Laroque, '"Heads and Maidenheads': Blason et contreblasons du corps," in *Roméo et Juliette: Nouvelles perspectives critiques,* ed. Maguin and Whitworth, 189-208. See also

17 See Laroque, "'Heads and Maidenheads,'" 196-97. See also

18 Lois Potter describes them as "jangled reminiscences" in '"Nobody's Perfect': Actors' Memories and Shakespeare's Plays of the 1590s," *Shakespeare Survey* 42 (1990): 91.

19 See Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (1966; reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 22-27.

20*The Comedy of Errors* 3.2.93-138. In "The letter that killeth: the Desacralized and the Diabolical Body in Shakespeare," *Shakespeare et le corps* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1991), Ann Lecercle makes the following commentary on this scene:

Nell's name is her body. … The second body is that of a type of representation that reached its apogee between 1550 and 1650, the landscape anamorphosis. For Nell's second body is a *mappa mundi. …* (143)

21 See Andre Topia, "Les liturgies du corps dans *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, "* in *Figures du corps,* ed. Bernard Brugière (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1991), 164.

22*The Tempest* 1.2.50.

23 Edward Snow, "Language and Sexual Difference in *Romeo and Juliet, "* in *Romeo and Juliet: Critical Essays,* ed. John Andrews (New York: Garland, 1993). Snow says that "the Nurse's memory weaves all this eventfulness into a matrix of primary female experience (birth, lactation, weaning, marriage, maidenheads and their loss)," 388.

24 In this connection, see for example Rabelais, Book 5, chapter 29:

… by the registers of christenings at Thouars, it appears that more children are born in October and November than in the other ten months of the year, and *reckoning backwards,* it will be easily found that they were all made, conceived, and begotten in Lent.

in *The Complete Works of Doctor François Rabelais,* trans. Sir Thomas Urquart and Peter Motteux, 2 vols. (1653; reprint, London: The Bodley Head, 1926), 2:626-27, my emphasis. See also

25 Carlo Ginzburg, *Les batailles nocturnes. Sorcellerie et rituels agraires aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles* (Turin, 1966; Paris, 1980; reprint, Paris: Flammarion, 1984), 39. (I translate here from the French edition.) In *Le sabbat des sorcières* (1989; reprint, Paris: Gallimard, 1992), Ginzburg establishes a connection between those nocturnal ridings and Mercutio's description of Queen Mab, 118.

26 Barbara Everett, *Young Hamlet: Essays on Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 115.

27 Paster, *The Body Embarrassed,* 224.

28 On this see Neil Rhodes, *Elizabethan Grotesque* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 49.

29 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* trans. Hélène Isowlsky (1965; reprint, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 21.

30 "Rhetoric and the Rehearsal of Death: the 'Lamentations' Scene in *Romeo and Juliet," Shakespeare Quarterly* 34 (1983): 390.

31*Romeo and Juliet* 1.5.55. See Laroque, '"Cover'd with an Antic Face': Les masques de la lumière et de l'ombre," 390.

32 In this connection see Ann Lecercle, "Winking in *Romeo and Juliet,"* in *Roméo et Juliette: Nouvelles perspectives critiques,* ed. Maguin and Whitworth, 259.

33 Whittier, "The Sonnet's Body and the Body Sonnetized in *Romeo and Juliet,"* 33.

34 See Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (1933; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 27-32.

35 Whittier, "The Sonnet's Body," 32.

36 See Jean Wirth, *La jeune fille et la mort. Recherches sur les thèmes macabres dans l'art germanique de la Renaissance* (Geneva: Librarie Droz, 1979), 137, 171-73. The rich iconographical appendix, with some 156 black-and-white reproductions of etchings, prints, drawings, and paintings, gives an idea of the diversity and continuity of the theme in Germanic art, from Dürer to Baldung Grien.

37 At a lecture at the Sorbonne Nouvelle in November 1992, Brian Gibbons spoke of "the Juggernaut of custom."

38 This contrasts with what happens in *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra* where love is presented against a heroic background and where the influence of Marlowe's *Tragedy of Dido* and *Tamburlaine* is visible. See Brian Gibbons, "Unstable Proteus: Marlowe and *Antony and Cleopatra,"* in *Shakespeare and Multiplicity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 182-202.

Source: "Tradition and Subversion in *Romeo and Juliet," in Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" : Texts, Contexts, and Interpretation,* edited by Jay L. Halio, University of Delaware Press, 1995, pp. 18-36.