



MATTHEW SPELLBERG

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*Feeling Dreams in Romeo and Juliet*

Among the many conceptually difficult situations evoked in the language of *Romeo and Juliet*, perhaps the most subtly frustrating is the one that closes Mercutio's famous "Queen Mab" speech. "This is the hag," he says of the miniature Fairy Queen who governs the dreams of men and women, "when maids lie on their backs, / That presses them and learns them first to bear, / Making them women of good carriage."<sup>1</sup> It is hard to imagine the situation: Mab, who is a "midwife . . . in shape no bigger than an Agate stone" (1.4.55–56), has suddenly grown into a full-sized (presumably male) lover, heavy and solid and forceful, suddenly crossing the line between the dream world and the real one. This shape-shifting is not so surprising in context—after all, fairies, spirits, and illusions are prone to transformation and metamorphosis. But what is striking about this passage is the physicality with which this illusory experience is expressed: Mab does not merely haunt women's dreams, she applies actual pressure to their bodies. The "pressing" is so intense that it even makes them "women of good carriage"—it actually alters the way in which they carry themselves. Dreams here change both a woman's body and a woman's comportment, for "carriage" refers both to a capacity for carrying (a lover on top, a baby inside) and to her way of carrying herself.<sup>2</sup> Both her presence in the physical world and the demeanor which guides that presence are altered by an insubstantial visitation, a wet dream that soaks through and reshapes both body and behavior.

Mab's weight begs a question about dreaming that reverberates across *Romeo and Juliet*. It is not one of the usual inquiries about dreams: that is, what do dreams look like? And, what do dreams

1. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York, 1997) 1.4.92–95. All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from this edition.

2. See 1.4.95n.

mean?<sup>3</sup> In this particular instance, questions of looking and meaning are relatively easily parsed. The fantastical, gossamer-winged Mab is exquisitely described by Mercutio, and his unsubtle innuendoes leave little room for interpretation. Instead, another question seems to predominate: What does a dream actually feel like? This seems like an unassuming or even basic inquiry, but it is far from self-evident. Does one actually feel the pressure of the dream? Does one only feel the simulation of the pressure of the dream? To what degree is it more or less intense than the felt pressure (from lovers, girdles, stones) of real life?

These distinctions are repeatedly blurred and called into question throughout *Romeo and Juliet*. The felt experience of illusion is uncannily close to the felt experience of reality. The dream-world that runs parallel to the real world in this play presents itself as unusually open to being experienced. Dreams seem highly physical and open to physical investigation, as if they can be entered through tactile sensation, explored through actual perambulation, smelled by the sense of smell, and seen by sight itself. Dreams with narrative concerns are present in this tragedy—dreams that carry with them ill omens and portentous symbols. But there is an equally omnipresent strain of dreams that address sensorial and phenomenological concerns here too—a strain of dreams about the nature of sentience itself. And these bring up one of the central ontological dilemmas of the play.

This dilemma arises in part because of the sharp contrast between the social world of *Romeo and Juliet* and the highly tactile, solitary dream-world of Queen Mab and, in figurative form, of the play's lovers. In Shakespeare's Verona, the means of understanding the world has been largely divorced from its material referentiality. Language itself has been lifted away from bodies and sensations; instead it hinges upon itself for definition, placing enormous importance on the sounds that make up "Capulet," or those that articulate "Montague." Similarly, the play abounds with conventions that are divorced from

3. For a fine summary of the history of the interpretation of dreams as "symbolic," "allegorical," and "prophetic," as well as their "objective and monitory" visual content from Classical Antiquity up until Shakespeare, see Marjorie Garber, *Dream in Shakespeare: From Metaphor to Metamorphosis* (New Haven, 1974), pp. 1–13. For a more in-depth analysis of the origins of an oneirological tradition grounded in visual appearance and symbolic value, see M. Andrew Holowchak, *Ancient Science and Dreams: Oneirology in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Lanham, Md., 2002).

experience: monologues delivered in sonnets, poetic images that refer only to other poetic images, and philosophical advice dispensed in clichés and rhyming couplets. The few things that are material are constantly threatened by an absorption into language: bodies, for example, almost turn into written contracts, hands into “the label to another deed” (4.1.57).

Throughout the play, a society that separates language and experience stands in marked contrast to the sheer perceptual and somatic potential of dreams. Visions appear unbelievably vividly in this play, and they insistently require the play’s dreamers and the play’s readers to ask and answer the question of what it means to feel one’s own presence in the world.<sup>4</sup> Dreams expand across myths and folklore, sweeping us along with them, and creating a space of unparalleled sensorial engagement amid gods, fairies, and ghosts. Mab rides her dream-chariot right over men’s necks and under their noses; Romeo dreams what it actually feels like to be a corpse; Juliet’s nightmarish imaginings bear witness to the extraordinary hardness and fragility of the human body by giving us an image of a skull beaten in with another bone. Even while dreams might seem illusory, they infuse the play with an enormous vitality, probing the cognitive process that goes into feeling. Marjorie Garber observes that dream in Shakespeare is frequently an “index of self-knowledge” (p. 3). In *Romeo and Juliet*, however, dream is an index of knowledge that is anterior even to the self. Dream posits an index of the sensations that piece together the felt experience of being itself, and as a result also measures with painful accuracy the violent tremors that unite man and woman, fantasy and reality.

## II

Before we examine how dreams exercise their perceptual intensity over the star-crossed lovers, however, we must attend to the world into which these visions will intrude; for the power of dream in this play is as much a matter of what kind of reality dreaming penetrates

4. A situation quite opposite from most descriptions of the link between dreams and actuality. Take, e.g., the moment of realization Hobbes describes, in which it is the state of *not dreaming* that demands that one examine the subject’s relation to the world: “waking I often observe the absurdity of Dreames, but never dream of the absurdities of my waking thoughts; I am well satisfied, that being awake, I know I dreame not; though when I dream I think my selfe awake.” *Leviathan*, ed. C.B. Macpherson (New York, 1985), p. 90.

into as it is of what kind of reality dreaming stands for. The place that Shakespeare paints in the first scenes of the play is dangerously artificial. It is a world that turns around meaninglessness, a world in which feeling and language have been intentionally separated. This is not to say that no one feels in *Romeo and Juliet*—on the contrary, people feel pain, lust, humiliation, discomfort and pleasure all of the time. Rather, it is that the public language of the play is totally separated from this experience.

The play's first exchange, like many that follow, clings obsessively to this divorce between words and experience:

SAMSON: Gregory, on my word, we'll not carry coals.

GREGORY: No, for then we should be colliers.

SAMSON: I mean, an we be in choler we'll draw.

GREGORY: Ay, while you live, draw your neck out of collar. (I.I.I-4)

Punning here indicates a complete disregard for the nature of actually engaging in an action: to “carry coals” means merely to be humiliated, to “be colliers” means only to be sneaky, and not really to have anything to do with the carrying of coals. The “choler,” meanwhile, that might bring about a swordfight links itself to the “collar”—that is, the noose—first and foremost by the association of sounds. Questions of life and death are encased within the triviality of the simplest puns.

This literary artifice will be frequently overtaken by and separated from the reality of “death and loss” in the play.<sup>5</sup> The problem is that no matter how frequently reality manifests itself through violence in Shakespeare's Verona, the people of the city continue to speak (and thus, to view the world) on a level of disastrously ignorant artificiality, as if language has withdrawn itself so neatly from the pleasures and dangers of living that even when it is forced to confront them, it simply passes on, returning to its old vocabularies. Even Romeo speaks in formulaic Petrarchan oppositions at the play's opening, lamenting “brawling love” and “loving hate,” and the “heavy lightness, serious vanity” (I.I.169, 71) of his torment—“stale poetic images,” Garber (2004) tells us, “that say nothing and mean nothing” (p. 192). This staleness is employed over and over again. Lady Capulet's plan to get Juliet to fall in love with Paris is a description of the handsome young man as a prized ledger book, “a volume” in which one should

5. Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York, 2004), p. 190.

“Examine every married lineament, / And see how one another lends content” (1.3.85–86). Friar Laurence’s advice, meanwhile, is delivered in rhymed aphorisms, full of good intention but totally inadequate for the problems the young lovers face. In Act 2, Romeo comes to him begging advice on a situation that threatens his life and family, and is given a homily in iambs about the virtues of making a clean confession: “Be plain, good son and homely in thy drift. / Riddling confession finds but riddling shrift” (2.2.55–56).

The self-referential and dominating quality of language in *Romeo and Juliet* is in part what Harold Goddard refers to when he compares being named a Capulet or Montague to the inevitability of spoken language itself: the “younger generations have no more choice in the matter than they have choice of the language they will grow up to speak.”<sup>6</sup> This power of language to consist solely of names is also what Julia Kristeva identifies as the thing that Romeo and Juliet most struggle against. Like them, she says, we “are incapable of subsisting solely within the symbolic order, constantly driven to seek the animal sources of a passion that defies the Name.”<sup>7</sup> The non-experiential, anti-corporeal strain of social language in Verona is also what Juliet decries when she says that her highly legal marriage to the County Paris (a union of two prestigious Names more than of two people), will force her hand to become “the label to another deed” (4.1.57). She worries here that her body will become nothing but a document, a collection of legally-binding words—much in the way that Paris has been presented to her as a well-kept ledger by her mother. Juliet announces her resistance to this “codifying” of the body a few lines later when she demands to be with grotesquely “bodily” things. “Hide me nightly in a charnel house,” she begs Friar Laurence, hoping to avoid the stale union waiting for her, “O’ercovered quite with dead men’s rattling bones, / With reeky shanks and yellow chapless skulls” (4.1.81–83).

This reference-denying language is what the star-crossed lovers challenge when they first meet, sharing between one another the lines of a love-sonnet. In doing so, they defy the central convention of the sonnet from Petrarch on—that it be a monologue removed from the

6. Harold Goddard, “Romeo and Juliet,” in *William Shakespeare: The Tragedies*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, 1985).

7. Julia Kristeva, “*Romeo and Juliet: Love-Hatred in the Couple*,” tr. Leon S. Roudiez, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, ed. John Drakakis (London, 1992), p. 299.

beloved woman to which it is dedicated, that language stand in for the fact that the lover cannot reach her in person. As Garber (2004) argues, “[t]he sonnet tradition of unattainable or unrequited love is turned inside out, and the artifice of conventional language goes with it” at this moment (p. 194). From that point on, the play gains momentum, its main characters living a passion whose alignment of language and sensation (“you kiss by the book” actually comes to mean that in the book, people kiss) leads them to break tragically with the society that constrains them and enter into the love that swallows them.

But where does this language come from? Garber (2004) observes that it comes as a surprise after what we have already seen of Romeo and his temperament: in 1.1, he is a “deliberate onstage caricature of the sonnet-writing, lovesick, moon-struck lover who places his lady on a pedestal.” (p. 192). Then, four scenes later, “his language seems all at once transformed” (p. 194). He is suddenly exquisitely original and, perhaps more importantly, highly referential. His language comes back to concrete images: the night becomes the dark body of an “Ethiope” upon which Juliet hangs as a bejeweled earring; and the torches in his immediate vicinity are outshone and instructed by the woman who teaches them “to burn bright” (1.5.41–42). The most important change, however, is that the word “kiss” now leads him directly to a kiss. Similarly, a “prayer” suddenly takes “effect” (and it is disarmingly sudden, compared to how long prayers usually take to be answered, whether addressed to God or to Petrarch’s Laura). This is the change in the lovers’ behavior that resists the substance-less power of Naming and tradition. Instead, language is synchronized with felt experience;<sup>8</sup> the enunciated and the tactile are in accord.

Perhaps the most immediate and frequently offered explanation for this change in Romeo’s linguistic temperament is simply that he has met his Juliet, and forgotten his silly infatuation with Rosaline.<sup>9</sup> But it remains to be explained where this new at-hand, immediately *felt* quality in Romeo’s language comes from.

8. Not necessarily, it should be noted, in a one-to-one relation to things, but rather as an immediate link between the articulation and feeling of an experience—i.e., between the phenomena of speech and of perception.

9. An explanation which critics as wildly disparate as Harold Goddard and Marjorie Garber agree upon. Goddard writes: “Romeo . . . after a sentimental and unrequited languishing after one Rosaline, falls in love at first sight with Juliet” (p. 29). Garber (2004) tells us, slightly less judgmentally, “When Romeo first catches sight of Juliet his language seems all at once transformed” (p. 194).

One place to look is in the intervening scenes to see if Shakespeare has hinted at the immanence of this strain of experiential speech that will quickly come to dominate the play. These scenes include: Romeo's encounter with the illiterate Capulet servant Peter, the first appearance onstage of Juliet's nurse, and, finally, Mercutio's first entrance. Of these three, this last scene is easily the richest and subtlest linguistically; and it is richest during Mercutio's "Queen Mab" speech:

She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes  
 In shape no bigger than an agate stone  
 On the forefinger of an alderman,  
 Drawn with a team of little atomi  
 Over men's noses as they lie asleep;  
 Her wagon spokes made of long spinners' legs,  
 The cover, of the wings of grasshoppers;  
 Her traces, of the smallest spider web;  
 Her collars, of the moonshine's wat'ry beams;  
 Her whip, of cricket's bone; the lash, of film;  
 Her wagoner, a small grey-coated gnat,  
 Not half so big as a round little worm  
 Pricked from the lazy finger of a maid;  
 Her chariot is an empty hazelnut,  
 Made by the joiner squirrel or old grub,  
 Time out o' mind the fairies' coachmakers. (I.4.49–60)

What is perhaps most striking about this passage is its simultaneous materiality and immateriality. The bringer of dreams is both a gossamer apparition and an intensely real, almost overwhelmingly described presence. Each component of her trappings is very tangible—drawn from a vocabulary of crickets, spiders, country maidens and forests—but at the same time clearly the unreal product of the imagination. In part this paradox comes about because, as Elaine Scarry believes, rarified images are the most easily and vividly composed on the surface of the mind. "Filmy objects," she writes, "hair, paper, light cloth, flower petals, butterflies (petals in motion)—continually move about in the mind almost without effort."<sup>10</sup> So much so, she asserts, that rare objects, like "ghosts, filmy curtains, shadows," can actually help us to imagine the movement and composition of more solid objects in the

10. Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton, 1999), p. 91.

mind (pp. 91–92). For example, Scarry observes, Homer does not ask us in the *Iliad* to imagine a spear sailing through the air; rather, he asks us to imagine its filmy shadow shooting across the ground—an act that we carry out with much greater ease than imagining the full spear on its own (p. 93). Mercutio’s deeply sensual list of thinness reads not unlike Scarry’s: grasshopper wings stand in for her butterflies, moonshine stands in for her ghosts. Mercutio seems to pile rarity on rarity, so that Queen Mab’s “collars” and “cover”—things we are accustomed to thinking of as filmy because they are made of cloth—are revealed to be made up of even thinner images, the “wings of grasshoppers” and “spider web.” Mercutio evokes for us the realness of dreaming by conjuring up the images most perfectly imagined by a reader or listener.

If this were the end of Mercutio’s description, it would be an extraordinary act of evocation, a brilliant deployment of the connection between the rarity of dream and the rarity of images the reader or playgoer is capable of imagining. But the following lines indicate that the ultimate end of this speech lies somewhere else, at once inside and outside of this rarefied imaginative field:

And in this state she gallops night by night  
Through lovers’ brains, and then they dream of love;  
O’er courtiers’ knees, that dream on curtsies straight;  
O’er ladies’ lips, who straight on kisses dream,  
Which oft the angry Mab with blisters plagues,  
Because their breaths with sweetmeats tainted are.  
Sometimes she gallops o’er a lawyer’s lip,  
And then dreams he of smelling out a suit;  
And sometimes comes she with a tithe-pig’s tail  
Tickling a parson’s nose as ’a lies asleep,  
Then dreams he of another benefice. (1.4.71–81)

We see that in dreaming, however filmy and illusive the image may be, there is something else that is in fact extremely solid and present. There is a physical or tactile feeling to dreaming. As Mab the dream-spirit “gallops” through the brains of lovers, “they dream of love.” As she rides over a courtier’s knees, he dreams “on curtsies straight.” The physicality in these situations is enacted twice over, bridged by the non-physical and hallucinatory experience of the dream itself. First, the dream is caused by a felt sensation on an actual part of

the physical body, like the knees, the lips, the nose. The dream of course follows. Then, at its climax, the dreamer himself enacts a second felt movement, curtsying, kissing, or smelling out a suit. Thus, neither the cause of the dream nor the dream itself is merely a visual or otherwise imagistic experience; they both have a felt component. And they are felt experiences that hinge upon an elementary mode of cognition in which one felt experience leads to another, almost like a reflex. The sensation of something on the lips provokes the mind to construct a complete kiss; the smell of something near the nose causes the lawyer to immediately “smell out” the things to which his profession has made him so sensitive.

Language here keeps referring back to felt experience: even though Mercutio’s speech hinges on metaphor (like “smelling out a suit”) and metonymy (lips lead to kisses, knees to curtsies), it keeps calling them back to the physical experience out of which those figures of speech grew. Language in these dreams, even though open to a multiplicity of meaning, nevertheless always remains in touch with the sensations it describes on the literal level. Thus, for Mercutio, a curtsy is not only the public symbol that connotes sycophancy, etiquette, and the restrictions and desires of ambitious nobles. It also refers back to its function as a word that purely describes an elementary movement: prior to any of its etymological links to “courtesy,” to curtsy is just to bend your knees. To think of the word in that sense is merely to be conscious of the complicated process required to pivot a joint in your legs—and to demonstrate that consciousness by giving it a name. You are aware, in Mercutio’s vision of dreaming at least, of exactly what *felt action* a word relates to, even as you are immediately aware of how the connotations of the word (through wordplay and association) easily translate into situations of subconscious fantasy or desire. We can imagine that were Queen Mab to visit Samson and Gregory from the first scene, she might weight their backs so that they would dream of “carrying coals” and being “colliers.”

What does it mean to associate the “filminess” of highly imagined images and wordplay with the weight of a deeply felt language? It certainly has something to do with the sonnet Romeo and Juliet share. For there, as in Mab’s dreams, a metaphor of representation is also flanked on either side by actual contact. Romeo’s tentative initial hand-touch inspires in his imagination the image of Juliet as a holy icon, and this image in turn inspires him to move back into another

tactile experience, this time with a kiss. As Stephen Greenblatt observes, “the punning in *Romeo and Juliet*’s initial exchange at the Capulet ball derives its power from the lovers’ conviction that there really is an essential relation between the touching of their hands and lips and a religious experience.”<sup>11</sup> This conviction is particularly powerful because religious experience usually floats above the actual touching of hands and lips, in a much more metaphysical or representational space.<sup>12</sup> But here, *Romeo and Juliet* have managed to reground the metaphysics of religion in the physics that pre-dates it: from the image of the saint we return to the body of the beautiful and virtuous-looking woman who might have posed for the icon-painter. Similarly, from the elaborate, ritualistic quality of prayer we return to its more basic predecessor—begging someone to fulfill a desire.

It seems highly possible that Mercutio is the dramatic, if comic, harbinger of this kind of “essential relation” between a literary figuration and an actual sensation. Of course Queen Mab’s dreams show us far shallower links between experience and representation than between a first kiss and religious iconography, but the conceptual structure of each dream she causes is similar to that of this passionate sonnet. The initial physical contact, as when Mab drives “o’er a soldier’s neck,” corresponds to the moment when *Romeo* touches *Juliet*’s hand; the metaphorical associations that follow are “ambuscadoes” and “Spanish blades” for the soldier, “two blushing pilgrims” before a “holy shrine” for *Romeo*. And, at the end of the dream, the sound of “drums” actually becomes *felt* enough that it wakes the soldier, as actually hearing real drums would. Likewise, at

11. Greenblatt, Introduction to *Romeo and Juliet*, p. 867.

12. See, e.g., Greenblatt’s analysis of a devotional altarpiece by the Meister des Palant-Altars, in *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, 2001). “This panel,” he writes, “is not simply a representation of the attempt to shorten the term of purgatorial imprisonment; it is an active agent in the attempt” (p. 51). That is, the representational and real qualities in medieval religion were rather falsely conflated—the stories and depictions of Purgatory were not merely depictions, but in fact the only reality Purgatory had to speak of, and creating or enacting these representations was the only way of interacting with the fiction of Purgatory’s “existence.” Greenblatt touches on the larger implications of this when he asks, half-rhetorically, of Purgatory itself, “[d]oes it bear repeating that it is all made up, every bit of it? . . . Purgatory is only an extreme and vulnerable instance of something far more widespread: it is palpably invented . . . yet it must pretend to have the compelling vividness and solidity of those things that we actually know to exist” (p. 85). What is remarkable about this moment in *Romeo and Juliet* is that the idolatrous imagery of Catholicism is redirected toward something that does exist—the very place (human hands and lips) from which that imagery sprang in the first place.

the sonnet's couplet, Juliet's reminder that saints do in fact grant prayers leads Romeo to have his own prayer granted with the famous kiss. In both cases, the wish-fulfillment of fantasy is grounded temporally on either side by felt experience. The filmy vivacity of the imagination, represented by Mab's phantom chariot and the saint's invisible portrait, becomes grounded in the intensity of somatic experience. The power of language and of the imagination—until now enfeebled by the play's literary and societal conventions—is plunged into the heart of experience.

Garber (1974) astutely observes that the mythic quality of Mercutio's speech opens the play up to the creative energies of the subconscious: "In pointing out to Romeo the superstition inherent in wish-fulfillment dreams, Mercutio commends the imagination of the dreamer-as-myth-maker, and himself becomes the dreamers' dreamer, master of these smaller fantasies, controlling illusion and reality through the multiple meanings of words" (p. 41). This in its turn invests great responsibility in the imagination, by which whole worlds can be created that depart from the rigidity of Shakespeare's Verona. But what must be examined further is the link between these mythic energies and the intense sensory quality of dreaming, for in both Mab's dreams and in Romeo and Juliet's sonnet, what is tactile brackets and enriches the mythical, felt-experience causes and results from imagined-experience.

### III

To examine this link requires a step back from *Romeo and Juliet* to consider the theories of dreaming that may be echoed in the play. A vague parallel might be drawn with Aristotle, who argues that dreams result from residual affections of perceptions retained by the senses.<sup>13</sup> In particular, Aristotle seeks to link our confusion over these residual affections to the predominance of emotion and the lack of critical faculty in sleep. Thus, the impulsive, irrational side of the soul is responsible for the organization of dreams; the consequence is that, with the shutting out of reason, "we gain a capacity for internal awareness we would not have had were we constantly in the waking

13. Holowchak, p. 42.

state.”<sup>14</sup> But this internal awareness does not quite explain the tactile experience of the dreamer for Mercutio, nor does it provide us with a reason for the closeness of fairies and myth to this highly felt dream-state.

This emphasis on feeling over ideas or images in *Romeo and Juliet* leads away from the metaphysical tradition, and toward a materialist one.<sup>15</sup> Among the most eloquent voices in this tradition is Lucretius, who writes extensively on the nature of dreams in Book IV of *On the Nature of Things*. The link between Mercutio and Lucretius’ atomistic Epicureanism is already announced by the “atomi” that draw Mab’s carriage, and by the miniscule materiality of her constitution.<sup>16</sup> But a more interesting parallel lies in Lucretius’ interest in what it means to feel what you are thinking. “Now listen,” he instructs his readers, “and hear what things stir the mind”—*quae moveant animum*—“for the mind is itself thin and wonderfully easy to move.”<sup>17</sup> Already here the extent to which the mind can be stirred or moved seems to relate back to dreams that arise from the pressing of knees and throats. Lucretius’ theory of imagination hinges upon the ease with which the mind is penetrated and stirred: imagined images, which like all images in the Epicurean account, are made of thin films of matter, “penetrate through the interstices of the body, and awake the thin substance of the mind within, and assail the sense” (IV, 730–31). This phenomenon manifests itself most strongly in sleep, when the other “senses are obstructed and quiet throughout the frame,” a phenomenon whose closest equivalent, Lucretius claims, is death (IV, 763–64). Thus, as with Mercutio, the dream-visitation is something akin to “nothing but vain fantasy, / Which is as thin of substance as the air” (I.5.98–99). But at the same time, it is distinctly felt by the dreamer. The dream is capable of physically moving the mind itself.

Lucretius seems to argue that we are most prone to noticing or feeling our mind being moved while we are sleeping, so much so that the facts of waking-life are annulled by the power of our own

14. Holowchak, p. 43.

15. This is not to say that *Romeo and Juliet* is a work of materialist philosophy, but rather that it picks up on a notion of tactile cognition for which there are philosophical precedents before deploying that notion for its own ends, as we have seen in the lovers’ shared sonnet.

16. My thanks to Stephen Greenblatt for drawing my attention, first in his lectures on Shakespearean tragedy at Harvard in the fall of 2006, and later in a seminar on Epicureanism, to the full weight of the allusion to atomism in Mercutio’s speech.

17. Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, tr. W.H.D. Rouse (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), IV, 722, 748.

thoughts, “to such a degree, that we seem surely to see him who has left his life, and of whom now death and dust are masters” (IV, 760–61). At the same time, he tells us, the experience of being mentally moved by material images demonstrates our capacity to move among and select those images. Of all the images that actively touch and penetrate our bodies, “the mind cannot perceive any sharply except those which it strains itself to see; therefore all the others perish except those for which it has prepared itself” (IV, 802–03). This line of materialist reasoning leads us to two subtler similarities with Mercutio. The first is the link between dreams and desire, enumerated in a list uncannily like Mercutio’s litany of dreamers. “And whatever be the pursuit to which one clings with devotion,” Lucretius tells us, “whatever the things on which we have been occupied much in the past, the mind being thus more intent upon that pursuit, it is generally the same things that we seem to encounter in dreams: pleaders to plead their cause and collate laws, generals to contend and engage battle, sailors to fight out their war already begun with the winds” (IV, 962–72). The second important similarity, however, is the tripartite structure of touching–imagining–touching echoed in both Mercutio and by the lovers’ joint sonnet. Once these images have penetrated and “moved” the mind, the will begins to order and select them into a narrative, picking and choosing until it has constructed an entire imaginary world. Although it is important that the courtier feel his knees being run over, it is also important that, because of his predisposition to curtsies, he will attend to that sensation and not to the many other possible sensations he is subject to (whether they be an Epicurean in-pouring of images or a fly landing on the nose) during sleep. And then, at the dream’s climax, the touchable, feel-able nature of reality presents itself yet again, regrounding images in the sensations of existence. “Children often, when held fast in sleep, if they think they are lifting up their garments besides a basin or low pot, pour forth all the filtered liquid of their body, drenching the Babylonian coverlets in all their magnificence.” Or again, even closer to Mercutio: “Those into the choppy tides of which youth the seed is first penetrating, when time has duly produced it in the frame, meet with images from some chance body that fly abroad, bringing news of a lovely face and beautiful bloom, which excites and irritates the parts swelling with seed, so that, as if the whole business had been done, they often pour forth a great flood and stain their clothes” (IV, 1030–36). Here is the

re-articulation for the opposite sex of the dream that “presses” maidens and “learns them first to bear.” Pressing and penetration force us to acknowledge the tactile presence of the world in or on the mind, which translates into images that are “felt” strongly enough that they induce in our bodies further perceivable responses: the wet of urination or of orgasm, the swell of seed and the “irritation” of the body’s most sensitive parts.

It is not my intention to argue here for an exact allegorical or symbolic correspondence between Mercutio’s linguistic extravagance and Lucretius’ atomistic science. But the deployment of this emphasis on the touchable in both cases leads to a similar revelation about ontology as it expresses itself through dreams. This is in some ways easier to see in a philosophical text than in a work of fictional literature, and Lucretius does in fact very purposefully insert a major ontological argument into the midst of his account of dreaming. His argument about the production of imagined images is itself flanked on either side by a material component: first, how these material image-films penetrate into the mind; then, later, how they penetrate out of the mind. In between the two is a larger philosophical commentary on the way in which our existence in the world relates to the information we receive from it. “Do not suppose,” he cautions his readers, “[t]hat the clear light of the eyes was made in order that we might be able to see before us; or that the ends of the calves and thighs were jointed and placed upon the foundation of the feet, only to enable us to march forward with long forward strides; that the forearms again were fitted upon sturdy upper arms, and ministering hands given on either side . . . Such explanations, and all other such that men give, put effect for cause and are based on perverted reasoning; since nothing is born in us simply in order that we may use it, but that which is born creates the use. There was no sight before the eyes with their light were born, no speaking of words before the tongue was made” (IV, 826–37).

In this astonishing, almost Darwinist passage, Lucretius tells us emphatically that man is not a creature of teleological orientation; his body and members did not grow directly into their uses. Man was not made to correspond to his functions, nor did his abilities precede the parts of his body that facilitate them. Materiality precedes identity; the being of something is anterior to its usability. We are first and foremost physical tactile beings; only afterward do we develop the ability to implement our physicality toward calculated ends. And, what is

more, nature is the original site of instruction about how to best align human intelligence and function with the demands of reality. “Nature taught men to avoid a wound before the left arm provided the interposition of a shield by artifice”; all such skills “were produced before any conception of their usefulness” (IV, 845–57). Nature produced the pure facts of human embodiment before assigning value to them (or, to use the more contemporary term, *selecting* the valuable from among them). Reality thus has a pre-utilitarian claim on mankind. It is not sufficient simply to assume our thoughts or needs somehow have an anterior and determining relationship with nature. On the contrary, nature motivates us, guides us, moves us and inspires our intellectual activity. “[T]he origin of the tongue came long before speech,” Lucretius tells us; therefore even speech is pulled up from the constitutive, touchable matter of reality itself.

## IV

An ignorance of precisely this situation is what plagues the public sphere of *Romeo and Juliet*. The play goes to extraordinary ends to portray a world in which this paradigm has been completely reversed, and to show that Verona suffers disastrously for it. Nature does not produce language in this city; language twists and manipulates nature. The predominance of speech over touch is a central concern in a play that is tragically about the determinism of naming. The potency of “Capulet” and of “Montague” rings throughout the play as only the loudest symptoms of this disregard for the link between being in the world and the body. A possessive adjective, for example, determines wealth or poverty: “An you be mine,” shouts Capulet at Juliet, “I’ll give you to my friend. / An you be not, hang, beg, starve, die in the streets” (3.5.191–92). Language is cause; sensation becomes merely effect. The insubstantial determines (and most often, condemns) the substantial in the social sphere of the play: a stupid pun on “Consort” kills Mercutio, and an undelivered letter undoes Romeo.

Against this fatal and fatalist train of cause-and-effect, the tactile closeness of shared words in Romeo and Juliet’s sonnet strikes out on its own, defying the reader and the world to look for a precedent to this depiction of language coming from and returning to felt experience. Its conceptual structure is anticipated by Mercutio’s fantastical description of dreaming in the previous scene. Romeo and Juliet’s

other passionately alive and yet utterly dreamlike interactions also unfurl along the tracks left by Mab's chariot. Romeo, who criticizes Mercutio for jesting at scars when he "never felt a wound," is—from his meeting with Juliet until the end of the play—always in the process of fastening speaking to the twin poles of perception and feeling. He sees Juliet, and from this moment language is born, as if to say, I see Juliet; now I may imagine; and through imagining, speak. "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?" comes his question, and already by the time his senses have confirmed the answer to this perceptual question, his mind has leapt into metaphor: "It is the east, and Juliet is the sun" (2.1.44–45). Only a few lines later, two senses conspire together to produce the needed felt experience that allows one to leap into a dream: "See how she leans her cheek upon her hand" (2.1.65), says Romeo, using sight to extend outward toward the craved, desired feeling of Juliet's hand. "O, that I were a glove upon that hand, / That I might touch that cheek!" (2.1.66–67). These three lines are another Mabbian dream in rapid miniature: an impulse gallops over Romeo's eye, and he is transformed on a plain of illusion into a glove. Then, at the climax of the metaphor, we see he has been using his imagination all along to reach out for yet another tactile sensation, even if a subjunctive one: "That I might touch that cheek!"

The dream—in this case the daydream, or poet's dream—reshapes felt experience by intensifying it. Like Mercutio's young maiden, Romeo is "pressed" into the right "carriage" for his intentions: he is molded into the glove that will fit itself perfectly over Juliet's hand, a layer sandwiched between her palm and cheek. The Epicurean credo that "there was no sight before the eyes were born" is dramatically relearned in love. Romeo learns that the experience of sensation precedes but also clings to emotion, and that any linguistic description of true passion appears within a space created by the revelations of both. By acknowledging the link between the two, Romeo seems to augment the range of his capacity for feeling: that which he could not have touched in real life (his Juliet high up in her window), becomes, as in a dream, the hand tightly enclosed within his glove. Small wonder then that he is so confused about where substantiality lies—"O blessèd, blessèd night! I am afeard, / Being in night, all this is but a dream, / Too flattering-sweet to be substantial" (2.1.181–83)—for he is in the process of discovering what it means to think through and toward substantiality itself. The anchoring of the

imagination in tactile sensation means actually *feeling* what it means to live in a way that until now seemed impossible in this play—a way that takes an Epicurean joy in knowing materiality is the deep origin of every imaginative leap.

Juliet's language too bears a resemblance to the dream structure which Mercutio has jestingly injected into the play. However, her figurations darken the parallel:

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

Punning on the double-meaning of “die,” Juliet chooses the two most intensely felt carnal experiences—orgasm and perishing—to be the anchors for her ensuing fantasy. Death will be the catalyst for myth, and myth will be the catalyst for a now universal physical experience: a whole world in love with the night, craning their necks upward to bear witness to the new-born constellation. This not only evokes the shape of the Mab dreams, but also echoes what Garber calls the celebration of the “dreamer-as-mythmaker” in Mercutio's speech.

And yet in Juliet's hands, this celebration of the closeness of feeling and myth is not a blissfully innocent phenomenon. It is heavy-laden with violence, the desire to “cut” out the figure of fantasy, to dismember experience in order to make a myth from it. In this way, Juliet's speech (along with Queen Mab's unearthliness) signals myth's malign twin: the occult. The perceived link between human experience and the stars is of course an ancient one. In his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton stresses the connection between stars and the secrets of health—especially between the heavenly bodies and the affliction of melancholy: “But these men you will reject peradventure, as astrologers, and therefore partial judges; then hear the testimony of physicians, Galenists themselves. Crato confesseth the influence of stars to have a great hand in this peculiar disease.”<sup>18</sup> Burton stands here for the compendious tradition that holds that the heavens shape humans.

18. Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. William H. Gass (New York, 2001), Part I, 208.

Juliet, however, radically inverts this pseudo-scientific assertion: in her cosmology a body determines the shape of the sky; the feeling of being alive becomes a way of imagining the cosmos, rather than the cosmos determining the feeling (illness, health, melancholy, choler) of being alive.

And yet the link between the occult and felt experience remains. Magic—be it astrology, or the fairy-conjuring of Mab—provides for an integration of tactile feeling and nature that pushes language and the self to the extreme. Stars synch up with bodies, curses with plagues, “fairies” (as Burton tells us) with the unseen “setting of a pail of clean water” in a house that they have decided to favor (I, 193). Magic is a *felt* experience that can affect one’s constitution. Burton tells us that magicians “cure and cause most diseases to such as they love or hate, and this of melancholy amongst the rest” (I, 205). The link between magic and dreaming, meanwhile, is an equally prevalent one. The astrologer-physician and sometime sorcerer Simon Forman frequently learned his “magic” from his dreams. In 1594, for example, he recorded the following dream: “I dremt I did see in a glas when I did call and that I did heare alsoe.” His modern-day biographer Barbara Howard Traister notes that a couple years later he was inspired to make “an attempt to realize this dream of seeing in a magical glass.”<sup>19</sup>

In *Romeo and Juliet* the occult becomes a language through which the connection between feeling and cognition is repeatedly articulated. The vocabulary is first introduced jokingly by Mercutio, but it becomes increasingly serious throughout the play. Ultimately, the presence of the occult demands that we understand the more sinister side of the exquisite link between sense and thought that Romeo and Juliet so optimistically announce with their sonnet. This enchantment of matter is prefigured with Juliet’s star-sequence, but it really enters the play in Act 4. Take, for example, Juliet’s anxious speech considering the consequences of drinking the sleeping potion Friar Laurence has given her:

How if, when I am laid into the tomb,  
I wake before the time that Romeo  
Come to redeem me? There’s a fearful point.  
Shall I not then be stifled in the vault,

19. Barbara Howard Traister, *The Notorious Astrological Physician of London: Works and Days of Simon Forman* (Chicago, 2001), p. 209.

To whose foul mouth no healthsome air breathes in,  
 And there die strangled ere my Romeo comes?  
 Or, if I live, is it not very like  
 The horrible conceit of death and night,  
 Together with the terror of the place—  
 As in a vault, an ancient receptacle  
 Where for this many hundred years the bones  
 Of all my buried ancestors are packed;  
 Where bloody Tybalt, yet but green in earth,  
 Lies fest'ring in his shroud; where, as they say,  
 At some hours in the night spirits resort—  
 Alack, alack, is it not like that I,  
 So early waking—what with loathsome smells,  
 And shrieks like mandrakes torn out of the earth,  
 That living mortals, hearing them, run mad—  
 O, if I wake, shall I not be distraught,  
 Environèd with all these hideous fears,  
 And 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 desp'rate brains? (4.3.29–53)

Here, Juliet has a dream gone horribly wrong. Rather than predicting for herself the tripartite structure of felt experience–fantasy–felt experience while sleeping, she imagines that first she wakes up, and then finds herself in a felt nightmare. Dream has infiltrated reality, and in doing so has reenacted its pattern to catastrophic result. Juliet wakes up, and the sheer feeling of being in her family vault drives her to make a leap into mad fantasy, hearing magical “mandrake shrieks” and seeing eerie “night spirits.” This, in turn, leads the nightmare-dreamer—this time not the soldier plagued by Queen Mab, but the living, waking Juliet—to enact another felt experience: dashing out her “desp'rate brains.” She could not be more anchored in the feeling of the human body; she even uses part of a relative's body—a “kinsman's bone”—to induce the experience in her own. The passion of Romeo and Juliet has reinvigorated an artificial and stale world with the felt-closeness of dream; but as this passage announces, the constraints of reality rapidly transform the felt-closeness of dream into the suicidal claustrophobia of nightmare.

And this brings us back again to Mercutio's playful speech and Lucretius' body- and experience-affirming oneirology. Yet again,

imaginative experience is linked to felt experience; language and image are in line with the body and senses. But now we see that the combination of deep feeling and vivid thinking has its own dangers. The playful, erotic image with which we began—our maid pressed into good carriage—has been recast as a maid pressed into a tomb. No less a compendium of Renaissance thought than Burton tells us as well that the erotic pressing that causes Lucretius' youth to "pour forth seed" and Mercutio's maiden to reform is in fact the madness of extreme melancholy. The imagination, he tells us, "as it is eminent in all, so most especially rageth in melancholy persons, in keeping the species of objects so long, mistaking, amplifying them by continual and strong meditation, until at length it produceth in some parties real effects, causeth this and many other maladies" (I, 253). Yet again, Burton follows the tripartite structure of imagining we have seen again and again: a physical ailment (melancholy), induces excitement in the imagination, which at length produces "real effects" and "many other maladies." This time, however, it is not the passionate intensifier of erotic experience, nor is it an Epicurean celebration of what it means to feel your body. It is insanity. "This we see verified in sleepers," he continues, "[w]hich by reason of humours and concourse of vapours troubling the phantasy, imagine many times absurd and prodigious things, and in such as are troubled with *incubus*, or witch-ridden (as we call it): if they lie on their backs, they suppose an old woman rides and sits so hard upon them that they are almost stifled by want of breath; when there is nothing offends but a concourse of bad humours, which trouble the phantasy" (I, 253). In this passage we are halfway between Mab and Juliet, only there is no light fairy, no earthly passion. Instead, the moment of transformation and amplification is terribly clarified: Mab's cobwebs are weighed down and expanded by the imagination until they turn into a suffocating blanket. In Juliet's words, the dreamer is "stifled in the vault, / To whose foul mouth no healthsome air breathes" (4.3.32–33).

The link between tragedy and imagination begins to articulate itself in this nightmare passage. The love between Romeo and Juliet accomplishes something Mercutio could never be capable of: it brings dream into reality, forces the tactile and the imaginary into accord with each other in waking life. This is in some ways a restorative action in the larger scheme of the play, redeeming the sterile, cruel determinism of Verona's blood feuds and Petrarchan clichés. But it is

also a destructive action. To bring physical feeling and fantasy together, to align one with the other, is to lose oneself within them entirely. Burton concludes his digression on “The Force of the Imagination” by examining its instrumentality in relation to passion: “this imagination is the *medium defers* [instrument] of passions, by whose means they work and produce many times prodigious effects: and as the phantasy is more or less intended or remitted, and their humours disposed, so do perturbations move, more or less, and take deeper impression” (I, 258). To align fantasy with passion, Burton tells us, is to become steadily more and more de-individuated, to sink further away from self-control and personal agency. *Romeo and Juliet* is a work in which fantasy is, in Burton’s language, dramatically “intended.” As it is “intended” or willed by the two lovers, the “perturbations” it engenders take “deeper impression,” and deny the two of them any measure of self-control. The self-conscious awareness of reason is drowned out by the introduction of dream and fantasy into waking life; in its stead, the lovers let the three-part structure of fantasy guide them. Physical contact induces wild dreams and delusions, and these wild fantasies demand even stronger tactile experiences to satisfy them.

Romeo’s final dream warns against any other interpretation of this link between carnal feeling and fantasy:

I dreamt my lady came and found me dead—  
 Strange dream, that gives a dead man leave to think!—  
 And breathed such life with kisses in my lips  
 That I revived and was an emperor. (4.4.6–9)

This vision gives perverted voice to the great Epicurean conceit: Romeo dreams what it would be like to be *just matter*—a corpse—and yet still be sentient, still have “leave to think.” This philosophical fantasy is a strange dream; in this moment, it amounts to death itself. The completely physical or felt is linked again with the cognitive operations of the mind, but this brings about a catastrophic delusion. To think in this way to the extreme, to dedicate the mind only to the contemplation of the experiences of material reality (which is a crucial component of the Epicurean ethos, in which we turn to materiality, knowing that divinity and spirit, if they exist, are “far removed and separated from our affairs” [Lucretius, II, 648]) is to go mad, and ultimately to die. Burton agrees, attributing “all ecstasies to this force

of imagination . . . as that priest whom Celsus speaks of, that could separate himself from his senses when he list, and lie like a dead man, void of life and sense” (I, 254). This is the risk of bringing the dream-structure into reality as well: if we align cognition with feeling, and pursue only the felt-experiences that will ground us in reality, then reality itself becomes expendable in pursuit of that feeling. The pun on “death” that pervades the play testifies to this: intense experiences are always moments of closure, annihilations of subjectivity and thought, a disappearance of the self into the intensity of being.

## V

It is the simultaneous reality and impossibility of bringing together fantasy and carnality—mind and body—that destroys Romeo and Juliet. They have far surpassed the emotive and sentient intuitions of Mercutio by linking dream directly into real life, and by living in both at once. Hence the confusion between the two that permeates the final scene. “He told me Paris should have married Juliet,” says Romeo in the Capulet crypt, “Said he not so? Or did I dream it so?” (5.3.78–79). Or again, “Shall I believe,” Romeo demands, “That unsubstantial death is amorous, / And that the lean abhorred monster keeps / Thee here in dark to be his paramour?” (5.3.103–05). The unsubstantial becomes substantial, the dreamlike the real. As if to confirm this on cue, we hear Romeo’s servant Balthasar say aloud, “I dreamt my master and another fought, / And that my master slew him” (5.3.138–39). The strangeness of this fatal reverie has infected the whole world; what was real seems to be a dream.

A still deeper conflation underpins this one, however, and Juliet will be the one to explain it. “I will kiss thy lips,” she tells the poisoned Romeo’s corpse (as if he were dead but still had “leave to think”), “Haply some poison yet doth hang on them, / To make me die with a restorative” (5.3.164–66). Life and feeling are confused here, and as a result the difference between the two is articulated for us. The three-part structure is again enacted: the kiss gives way to a fantasy of “restoration,” which gives way to the most felt experience of all—the dagger that one line later finds its “sheath” in Juliet’s breast. But now we see that fantasy is not anchored on either end by life, but rather by a deep, prehuman idea of sensation. It is an idea of the material world coming together, pieces fitting into the whole that annihilates the

need for human subjects, and moves everything as if by an inevitable force. Herbs and poisons find their place; so do daggers find their sheaths. “Restorative” calls back to its Latin root *restaurare*, “to give back (something either lost or removed).”<sup>20</sup> The poison gives back the tactile experience that had been taken away by the artificial feuding of the Capulets and Montagues; matter has been conserved. Just as a first touch, when magnified through fantasy, results in a first kiss in Act 1, that kiss itself inspires a vast fantasy that is finally regrounded in the final scene by a still more intense physical experience. Life itself becomes a fantasy bridging two felt experiences, finding its blissful but heartbreaking purpose in their completion.

An impossible, unsustainable deepness destroys Romeo and Juliet. This deepness is one of the mind moving down into the realm of the body itself, an ontology that sees itself only in terms of the sensations of material being. This is in part the Epicurean realization of what it means to live in materiality, to focus the mind and body on feeling only the reality that surrounds us. But it understands the potency of this feeling of being in a way that transcends the tranquility of Epicureanism. Perhaps obtusely it looks forward to Martin Heidegger, who tells us “Nihilation unfolds essentially in Being itself, and not at all in the existence of man—so far as this is thought as the subjectivity of the *ego cogito*.”<sup>21</sup> Thought as subjectivity, thought as metaphysics, is removed from Being, and also from the nothingness that is the indescribable sensation of feeling your self merged into the curves of reality. Mercutio dismisses “nothing” as the realm of dreams, “vain fantasy, / Which is as thin of substance as the air” (1.5.98–99). But the lovers know that feeling is also a kind of nothingness—it is the state of not requiring an object or a subject, of denying the need for naming or identity. “Thus with a kiss I die,” says Romeo; the action annihilates the self. Only the sensation—kiss, orgasm, death—remains. “The nihilating in Being is the essence of what I call nothing,” says Heidegger. But he immediately qualifies two manners that Being inhabits when it “thinks the nothing” that is feeling the world around it. “To healing,” he writes, “Being first grants ascent into grace; to raging its compulsion to malignancy” (p. 261). The triumph and

20. “Store,” paragraph 2, Eric Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (London, 1958).

21. Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, 2nd edn., ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco, 1993), p. 261.

tragedy of Romeo and Juliet is to manifest both at once, to restore the feel of living and—in the desire to restore that feeling beyond the threshold of the self's own tolerance for sensation—to destroy it as well.

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