

## Wherefore Art Thou Tereu?: Juliet and the Legacy of Rape

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*Renaissance Quarterly* 58 (2005), pp. 127-56

### I

To take Juliet's "Wherefore art thou Romeo?" as a practical question about location is a notorious and vulgar error. Yet her next question might justifiably be, "Wherefore art thou where thou art?" That is the distinct implication of her next "wherefore" (2.2.62)<sup>1</sup>, and if audiences and readers could break free from the high-romantic reputation of the scene, they might start asking it for her. But the seemingly exhaustive commentary on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* has contrived to ignore a cluster of allusions linking the hero to the most notorious rapists of classical culture: Tereus, Tarquin, Hades, and Paris. Though Romeo's covert activities under Juliet's window may not seem especially sinister on their own – boys will be boys – there is something lurking out there with him: a cumulative culture of sexual extortion from which Juliet will have to extricate her love story. The persistent silent erasure of these threats, great and small, by editors and critics typifies the reduction of the play's exploration of the spectrum of sexual aggression into an absolute binary of rape and consent – a binary that may serve the ethical demands of our culture, but hardly matches the complicated experience of adolescent courtship to which the play speaks so engagingly.

Romeo's own explanation for his whereabouts hardly exonerates him of peeping: he found the place "By love, that first did prompt me to inquire; / He lent me counsel, and I lent him eyes" (2.2.80-81). Certainly the degraded sexual banter Mercutio persistently applies to the situation invites us to suppose that Romeo is seeking out his

beloved's "straight leg, and quivering thigh, / And the demesnes that there adjacent lie" (2.1.19-20) by any means and to the full extent possible. If Rosaline was unwilling to "bide th' encounter of assailing eyes" (1.1.213), as Romeo complains, perhaps he will have better luck this time.

After a series of gently parried thrusts toward Juliet's body, and after learning that the feud will inhibit conventional courtship, Romeo—"bewitched by the charm of looks" (2.Chorus.6)—lurks "bescreen'd in night" (2.2.52) while the Capulet household readies for bed. For forty-nine lines after Juliet appears in her window (doing what?), he says nothing, only stares in secrecy. Twice at least, the text suggests, Romeo prolongs his advantage by overcoming an urge to reveal his presence ("I will answer it. / I am too bold" [2.2.13-14] and "shall I speak at this?" [l. 37]), and instead remains in hiding as Juliet exposes more and more, at least of her feelings. "'Tis not to me she speaks" (l. 14), Romeo assures himself, and thus, by the peculiar logic of this etiquette, he need not reply but can remain concealed to listen further.

To accuse Romeo of voyeurism here may seem mean-spirited, both toward the character and toward the play, but to exonerate him seems premature (or retroactive), and deprives us of yet another level on which the play traces the growth from immature to mature eroticism. Nor is there anything inherently ahistorical about the accusation. Despite what may have been a lesser standard of bodily privacy across many sections of Renaissance society, the possibility of voyeurism is verified by the persistence of various scopophilic lyrics and sexual jokes in the period, and also by persistent reference (in the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries) to the myth of Actaeon—a hunter who gazes on the virgin moon-goddess Diana as she bathes

unclothed, and who is then destroyed when she turns him into a stag to be pursued by his hounds.<sup>2</sup> That Romeo here vows by the moonlight (which in the source is what exposes him to Juliet's view)<sup>3</sup> may be romantic, but it is also plausibly an evocation of Actaeon's story—especially since the wary virgin, Juliet, warns him that he may be hunted down and torn apart by a pack if he is noticed there.<sup>4</sup>

Hapless Actaeon's glimpse of Diana was, by most accounts, initially accidental; yet Romeo's immediate precursor is more aggressive and willful. In Arthur Brooke's *The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet* (1562), Romeus casts "his greedy eyes" toward Juliet's window, and "In often passing so, his busy eyes he threw, / That every pane and tooting [i.e., peeping] hole the wily lover knew."<sup>5</sup> In the play, beneath Juliet's balcony, Romeo's metaphors imply similar motives. Gazing up at the "fair sun" Juliet, he immediately urges her to throw off her servitude to the virginal moon, and does so in terms that suggest he has a specific interim request of her: "Her vestal livery is but sick and green, / And none but fools do wear it; cast it off" (2.2.8-9). It is worth noting here that English law as well as classical mythography judged men's eyes primarily responsible for sexual crimes. Edward Coke notes that "of old time rape was felony, for which the offender was to suffer death, but before this act the offense was made lesser, and the punishment changed, viz. from death, to the losse of the members whereby he offended, viz. his eyes, *propter aspectum decoris, quibus virginem concupivit*."<sup>6</sup>

Romeo's plea "that I were a glove upon that hand, / That I might touch that cheek" (ll. 24-25) is generally taken as a moment of high aesthetic romanticism, if charmingly puerile. By wishing to be the glove, rather than the invasive hand or phallic finger, Romeo stays a decorous arm's length from, say, the sardonic De Flores of *The*

*Changeling*, whose possession of Beatrice's glove leads him to consider "thrust[ing] my fingers into her sockets here,"<sup>7</sup> or from Shakespeare's own Tarquin, who seizes Lucrece's glove on his way to her bedchamber (ll. 316-22). But Romeo's imaginings here are close kin to Parthenophil's increasingly vulgar wishes in Barnabe Barnes's Sonnet 63 (1593). After a quatrain citing Jove's predatory metamorphoses (becoming a bull to abduct Europa, an imposter-Diana to rape Callisto, a golden shower in Danae's lap), Parthenophil indulges in some fantasies of his own:

Would I were chang'd but to my mistresse' gloves,  
That those white lovely fingers I might hide;  
That I might kisse those hands, which mine hart loves,  
Or else that cheane of pearle, her necke's vaine pride,  
Made proude with her necke's vaines; that I might folde  
About that lovely necke, and her pappes tickle,  
Or her to compasse like a belt of golde;  
Or that sweet wine, which downe her throate doth trickle,  
To kisse her lippes, and lye next at her hart,  
Runne through her vaynes, and passe by pleasure's part.<sup>8</sup>

We are now not far removed from the clowns who wish they were fleas that they might inhabit the undergarments of the kitchen-maid Nan Spit in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, or the various smirking personae of Cavalier verse who lasciviously imagine transforming themselves into their mistresses' garters: it is only too easy to degenerate from Lovelace's "Elinda's Glove" to his later "Her Muff." Romeo mopes into the vicinity of those degrading analogues in the balcony scene, and at 3.3.30-41 where he details the

small creatures, including flies, who will have access to Juliet's body from which he himself is banished.<sup>9</sup> And what might we deduce is (implicitly) on Romeo's mind in his very next speech, when he compares himself to a mortal whose "white-upturned wond'ring eyes...gaze on" an angel who "bestrides the lazy puffing clouds, / And sails upon the bosom of the air" (2.2.26-32)? Gazing up at a bestriding form tends to offer an intimate view, and two scenes later, the "smock" of the nurse (who is herself enduring the "ropery" [2.4.146] of Mercutio's verbal assault<sup>10</sup>) is called "a sail" (102-3). These offenses may seem mild, but they raise the question of whether Romeo intends to earn or steal the erotic commodities he seeks from Juliet.

Juliet promptly and quite sensibly devalues Romeo's oaths, since "at lovers' perjuries, / They say, Jove laughs" (2.2.92-3); Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* advises young men not to "be timid in your promises; by promises girls are caught; call as witnesses to your promise what gods you please."<sup>11</sup> She therefore reacts to his subsequent "O, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?" with a testing, and arguably testy, question of her own: "What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?" (ll. 125-26). Even what she has already given has cost her "a maiden blush" (l. 86). There is fear, not just girlish generosity, in her wish that she could retract her gift of love so she could "give it thee again" (l. 131)—an anticipation of the problem of virginity as an erotic commodity.

Juliet's best alternative to that impossible retraction is to render Romeo's own commitment unretractable, and (as throughout this scene, where she wonders about high walls and worries about armed guards while he blithely, even blitheringly, claims love can somehow easily transcend such things) she answers his vague Petrarchan formulas with practical details:

JULIET: Three words, dear Romeo, and then goodnight indeed.

If that thy bent of love be honorable,  
Thy purpose marriage, send me word to-morrow,  
By one that I'll procure to come to thee,  
Where and what time thou wilt perform the rite.

(II. 142-46)

The possibility that this Romeo is merely an amorous predator clearly crosses the minds of both Juliet and her protective Nurse: “if thou meanest not well” says Juliet in the first balcony scene (I. 150), and the Nurse warns him not to “lead her in a fool’s paradise” before inviting him back for the second (2.4.165-66). The next scene begins with the Friar, too, fearing that Romeo is just another young man inclined to seduce and abandon, and inclined to believe he is fulfilling body and soul when he is merely reciting a clichéd and destructive script. The scene after that begins with Mercutio offering a similar—though more blunt and more approving—analysis, and ends with the Nurse worrying the same point. Indeed, by delaying her report about Romeo, the Nurse seems to demonstrate the coquettish techniques that Juliet has dangerously failed to practice: increasing male desire by deferring it, mixing a feigned dislike with liking, and indignation with playfulness, and demanding protracted bodily ministrations (in the Nurse’s case, a back-rub) before surrendering the main thing desired (in the Nurse’s case, news of Romeo’s reply).

The phallic violence that Romeo has long and unhappily refrained from imposing on Rosaline, and now newly refrained from imposing on her cousin Juliet, he takes out on her cousin Tybalt (Shakespeare’s contemporaries did not need Freud to help them

recognize stabbing as a version of rape<sup>12</sup>). As in *Othello*, the swordfight on the street looks very much like a displacement of the confrontation in the newlyweds' bedroom.<sup>13</sup> In the confrontation with Tybalt, Romeo is at first too affectionate to draw his sword, then—feeling his manhood compromised by his gentle passivity—returns with reckless violence against Juliet's flesh and blood: "Now I have stain'd the childhood of our joy / With blood remov'd but little from her own" (3.3.95-6). Instead of a confirmatory showing of the wedding-night sheets, spotted with the blood of maidenhead, the wedding is compromised by the public display of a bloody shroud.<sup>14</sup>

News that "Romeo's hand shed Tybalt's blood" makes Juliet cry out, "O serpent heart, hid with a flow'ring face" (3.2.71-3); but this is only an amplification of something she might have cried had Tybalt and Romeo never fought, something she must already (however unwillingly) have suspected. The fears that Juliet intermittently voices in the play can be readily located in its immediate source, Arthur Brooke's *Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, where they are, if anything, even more conspicuous.<sup>15</sup> Brooke's Juliet suspects the phallic serpent of treachery:

What if his suttel brayne to fayne have taught his tong,  
And so the snake that lurkes in grasse thy tender hart hath stong?  
What if with friendly speache the traytor lye in wayte,  
As oft the poysond hooke is hid, wrapt in the pleasant bayte?<sup>16</sup>

These images of nearly satanic ambush and deceit may seem overly dire, but they clearly establish the idea that Juliet's specific fear in Brooke is of a sexual fall: a fear she then elaborates by noting those Renaissance poster-boys of misogyny, Aeneas and Theseus:

Oft under cloke of truth, hath falshod served her lust  
And toorned theyr honor into shame, that did so slightly trust.  
What, was not Dido so, a crouned Queene, defamd?  
And eke for such an heinous cryme, have men not Theseus  
blamd?<sup>17</sup>

Later, after Romeus kills Tibalt, Juliet returns to her former suspicions that Romeus gave her merely “paynted promises” and “with veile of love” hid from her his “hatreds face.”<sup>18</sup> Disingenuous seduction may lack the triumph of men’s violence over women’s will by which modern culture identifies rape, especially since it involves at least an illusory consent, but for women (and indeed for the law) it has long represented one more middle case in the spectrum between rape and love-making. Limiting one’s interpretive aperture to the rosier hues of that spectrum does no service to the love story, because it does no justice to the dangers Juliet must accept in pursuing it.

The fear of callous abandonment (or even murder)<sup>19</sup> is predictably subtler in Shakespeare’s version, but it persists. Though 2.2 of *Romeo and Juliet* is generally known as “the balcony scene,” there are actually two balcony scenes: one on the way up, one on the way down. We arrive at the second balcony scene with Romeo in obvious jeopardy, but Juliet hardly less so. As the wedding-night ends, her first words are the archetypal complaint of the soon-to-be-abandoned woman: “Wilt thou be gone?” (3.5.1). It is easy enough for us to know she is not Dido, but how can she be confident that her dream-boat will not float off in the manner of Aeneas, or something even worse? (Similar fears occur to Jessica about her feud-crossed elopement with Lorenzo in *The Merchant of Venice* [5.1.1-20].) A potentially disturbing feature of the first

balcony scene is that Romeo enters; a potentially disturbing feature of the second is that he exits.

In 2.2, Juliet questioned in the practical voice: who are you, how did you get in, how are you going to get out, what are we going to do about all this, how will I get a message to you, where and at what time? Romeo is full of empty clichés about the moon and her eyes and eternity. In 3.5, however, the roles appear to have reversed, perhaps because the balance of power has shifted in the aftermath of sexual consummation. Romeo is the one focused on business, while Juliet is lost in romantic dream and hyperbole, wanting to pretend it to be midnight. What satisfaction can she have that morning from his rather formal, proverbial, and seemingly complacent responses to her passionate entreaties here, and her worries about her continuing attractiveness to him? The contrast of tones is striking:

JULIET: Art thou gone so, love, lord, ay, husband, friend!

I must hear from thee every day in the hour,

For in a minute there are many days.

O, by this count I shall be much in years

Ere I again behold my Romeo!

ROMEO: *[From below]* Farewell!

I will omit no opportunity

That may convey my greetings, love, to thee.

JULIET: O, think'st thou we shall ever meet again?

ROMEO: I doubt it not, and all these woes shall serve

For sweet discourses in our times to come. (3.5.43-53)

His speeches here are as formally clothed as hers are emotionally naked.

The fictive spaces and physical arrangements of the two balcony scenes thus take us from the verticality of courtship idolatry—balcony as pedestal—to the horizontal parity of the consummated marriage—balcony as bed. The scenes also take us from the extremely tenuous privacy of the lovers' isolation from their families to a relationship that is no longer entirely secret, and that is pressured in increasingly drastic ways by the circumstances of the play-world. Indeed, the much shorter farewell episode records that pressure by its very brevity: 59 lines to Romeo's exit, in contrast to the 189 lines of 2.2, which keeps not ending. The role of the Nurse is especially significant here, too. In the first scene she is a minor and invisible irritant, perhaps even a helpful one in giving occasion to renew the farewells and resistance to focus the desires; her actual appearance in the second scene, however, brings with it not just her usual bawdy-comic energies, but also a sharp note of danger. Her warnings to "be wary, look about" (3.5.40), remind us that, from the perspective of the feud, their clandestine marriage remains illicit and vulnerable. At that instant Romeo descends from Juliet, and they are never together again in life.

The differences between the scenes are also recorded metrically, if we take John Barton's point that "a shared verse line says, 'pick up the cue.'"<sup>20</sup> In the first balcony scene, Romeo and Juliet share eight lines. Their mutual interruptions and self-interruptions, signaled by syntax as well as meter, and the uneven lengths of their speeches create a feverish pace on stage and establish an intimate connection between them. In contrast, the second balcony scene opens with Romeo and Juliet taking turns in an orderly fashion in speeches of similar lengths. The awkward, ecstatic

energies of 2.2 are depleted. There are no incomplete sentences and only one shared line, and a rather chilly one it is. No wonder the word “fickle” now winds itself into three consecutive lines of hers (3.5.60-62), though she keeps assuring herself she isn’t applying it to Romeo.

Is the fuel gauge of this passion, though surely not on Empty, already showing that first little flicker of the low-tank warning light? Our traditions and desires in reading the story resist such suspicions, but Juliet cannot know the traditions, or trust the desires. Accordingly, the language of this abbreviated aubade is strongly charged with regret on her part, and with exhaustion on his. Her claim to Romeo, in asking him to stay longer, that it was the nightingale's song "that pierc'd the fearful hollow of thine ear" (3.5.3) articulates her own pierced virginity. (That the “hollow” is “fearful” also suggests, retroactively, Juliet’s ambivalence toward her own sexual desires.) His refusal, also expressed with anatomical precision, is based on the fact that "night's candles are burnt out" (l. 9). How can she be sure that Romeo has not taken his pleasure in the full knowledge that he would be gone the next day anyway, and (because of the illicit nature of their clandestine marriage) no one could profitably say anything to call him to account? The laws were generally quite clear that a woman who failed to cry out immediately for help – therefore, any woman who (like Juliet) was within earshot of potential rescuers --forfeited any right to claim rape thereafter. Brooke’s Juliet voices that very fear:

And thou, the instrument of Fortunes cruell will,  
Without whose ayde she can no way, her tyrans lust fulfill,  
Art not a whit ashamed, (as farre as I can see)

To cast me of, when thou hast culd the better part of me.<sup>21</sup>

Although it is Fortune to whom she attributes this Tarquinian cluster of cruelty, will, tyranny, and lust, these seem barely disguised accusations of Romeus himself as one who shamelessly “culls” her and then casts her aside. Indeed, when Romeus explains why Juliet must not depart with him—a decision which modern students of Shakespeare’s play certainly recognize as questionable—his arguments seem far-fetched, and include the expectation that he will be executed “as a ravishor” of “a careless childe.”<sup>22</sup>

A further fear awaits either Juliet, one that would make such a betrayal at once more explicable and more terrible, and would align the betrayal with the modern perception that rape is a crime based more in power than in sexuality. Might not this offer Romeus or Romeo the last laugh on a family he hates—a dirty joke for his Montague pals and a dark stain on the Capilet/Capulet honor?<sup>23</sup> In Shakespeare’s “The Rape of Lucrece,” the tyrant Tarquin actually wishes that he had some familial grudge against Lucrece’s husband, because it might give him an “excuse” for committing the rape, “As in revenge or quittal of such strife” (ll. 232-36);<sup>24</sup> and as in many other Renaissance rape-stories, the victim’s suicide is largely an effort to protect her family from shame by proving that the intercourse was in no way consensual.<sup>25</sup> In Brooke, Juliet explicitly worries that Romeus will seduce and then defame her as part of the feud, giving the Capulets an affront which they will find unanswerable in kind:

Perhaps, the great revenge he cannot woorke by strength,  
By suttel sleight (my honor staynde) he hopes to worke at length.  
So shall I seeke to finde my fathers foe, his game,

So I defylde, Report shall take her trompe of blacke defame,  
Whence she with puffed cheeke shall blowe a blast so shrill  
Of my dispraysse, that with the noyse Verona shall she fill.  
Then I, a laughing stocke through all the towne becomeme,  
Shall hide my selfe, but not my shame, within an hollowe toombe.<sup>26</sup>

Shakespeare's Juliet will find herself in a tomb soon enough, in an effort to conceal the truth about that amorous night.

Shakespeare connects the polemically cautionary world of Brooke<sup>27</sup> to his own play early in the very first scene, when the Capulet servant Sampson—whose behavior is about to be mimicked by his betters—boasts that “I will show myself a tyrant: when I have fought with the [Montague] men, I will be civil with the [Montague] maids; I will cut off their heads...their maidenheads” (1.1.21-26). The implication that this interfamilial war might spill over into sexual exploitation prepares us to recognize the further threat of deception and humiliation Juliet must evaluate.

The unpleasant possibilities we have been raising would bring into focus another pair of ominous classical allusions. Juliet opens the second balcony scene with rape-references so indirect that they seem to have escaped commentary by the play's countless editors and critics, yet distinct enough to resonate Ovidian anxieties elsewhere in the play.<sup>28</sup> As usual, it is difficult and perhaps unnecessary to judge whether these allusions should be taken as conscious on Juliet's part, or reflecting a subconscious anxiety she dares not quite confront, or imposed by Shakespeare as a warning signal—exterior to the character—to the audience. It is worth noticing, though, that she is evidently inventing the nightingale, whether as an oblique expression of her

own fears or as a provocation to Romeo. Although neither the nightingale nor the pomegranate tree appear in Shakespeare's known sources, they appear together in her aubade, carrying considerable emblematic weight:

JULIET: Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day.

It was the nightingale, and not the lark,

That pierc'd the fearful hollow of thine ear;

Nightly she sings on yond pomegranate tree.

Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.

(3.5.1-5)

This draws on a sequence of bird references in their previous encounters (2.2.22, 158-83; 2.5.7, 74), and a prominent play in the previous decade—Lyly's *Campaspe*—signals the ominous associations of this avian pairing:

What Bird so sings and yet does wail?

O 'tis the Ravish'd Nightingale.

Jug, jug, jug, jug, Tereu, she cries,

And still her woes at midnight rise.

Brave prick-song! Who is't now we hear?

None but the lark so shrill and clear.

Now at heaven's gate she claps her wings,

The morn not waking till she sings.<sup>29</sup>

According to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the nightingale originated as Philomel, who was transformed in the aftermath of being raped by Tereus. The bird's melodious song is both compensation for Philomel's brutal silencing—Tereus cut out her tongue—and

lamentation. The nightingale is said to press a thorn against its breast to give its song a lyric, a cry of accusation against the rapist: "Tereu, Tereu!"

Wherefore might Romeo be Tereu? Suppose what Juliet thinks she hears is neither nightingale nor lark, but the proverbial fat lady singing, marking an ending, an undignified if operatic defeat. Tybalt would clearly want to offer his young cousin a warning resembling what Marcus tells Lavinia, after the fact, in Shakespeare's preceding tragedy: "A craftier Tereus, cousin, hast thou met" (*Titus Andronicus* 2.4.41). These stories usually seem to be on Shakespeare's mind when a woman is about to be violated, even when the violation is by trickery rather than force. Jachimo compares himself to Tarquin as he sneaks into Imogen's bedchamber to steal the sight of her uncovered breast, and notes that "She hath been reading late / The Tale of Tereus" (*Cymbeline*, 2.2.12, 44-45). The chorus of the singularly ineffective fairy spell designed to protect the sleeping Titania, who is about to be deluded into the embrace of the transformed Bottom, begins each time by calling on "Philomele" to provide the song (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2.2.13, 24). Tereus's wedding with Procne was illuminated by "Furies snatching Tapers up that on some Herce did stande"<sup>30</sup> (matching Shakespeare's insistent blending of wedding and funeral); Tereus tried "to corrupt hir servants" and "to bribe hir Nurce to prosecute his vice"; finally, he hid his captivity of Philomel by telling everyone she had died.<sup>31</sup> All these features draw that then-famous rape story into the mental field of spectators at the now-famous love story of Romeo and Juliet.

Our familiarity with *Romeo and Juliet* leads us to assume we are in the scenario of Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes," where the young woman wants the young man to

sneak into her chamber and seduce her, and he does intend marriage. But we cannot—or at least Juliet cannot—absolutely put aside an alternative scenario, which Shakespeare recorded as “The Rape of Lucrece.” There Shakespeare repeatedly cites the figure of Philomel because Lucrece wants to replace the birdsong of day, like the lark, with the voice of that nightingale, to prevent day from shedding light on her shame in the aftermath of the rape (ll. 1079-1148). Juliet does not say that she has been abducted and raped by Romeo, but she does imply that, were Romeo to leave now, instantly, then what has happened between them will have been little better than that. Indeed, to have married the young noblewoman Juliet without her parents’ consent places Romeo in a murky legal category associated with rape;<sup>32</sup> and by making Juliet even younger than she is in Brooke, Shakespeare assures the criminality of the match by Elizabethan standards, which also means that neither the Nurse nor the Friar (both of whom will lack the courage to defend the couple in other moments of crisis) could support Juliet’s claim of marriage without risking jail. In the anonymous *The Puritan* (1607), which at moments looks like a comic parody of *Romeo and Juliet*, Moll comes out on her balcony “lacing of her clothes,” and her prospective boyfriend Penny-dub offers to climb up to her bed-chamber, but she refuses: “Ile keepe you downe, for you Knights are very dangerous if once you get above.”<sup>33</sup> The crime that made Rome a republic hovers uneasily around a young Veronese with the exotic name of Romeo.<sup>34</sup>

## II

Juliet's imaginary nightingale sings from a pomegranate tree, surely directing our attention to a second classical story: Hades' rape of Proserpina, who was obliged to

remain as his bride part of every year because she ate some seeds from an underworld pomegranate tree. That story will resurface in Shakespeare's late plays: in both *The Winter's Tale* (4.4.116-18) and *The Tempest* (4.1.89) it serves to warn that even such princes among men as Florizel and Ferdinand might become rapists rather than fiancés to young women who love too much, and trust too far. It is especially applicable to Juliet, since (in some Renaissance versions of the story) Hades wanted to marry Proserpina, but knew that her parents would angrily forbid the match.

In the first balcony scene, Juliet is already rehearsing for the role of Proserpina: "Sweet, good night!/ This bud of love, by summer's ripening breath, / May prove a beauteous flow'r when next we meet" (2.2.120-22). What presses the seasonal floral reference toward the classical myth is Juliet's suggestion, at the end of the Capulet ball, that the only alternative to marrying Romeo would be a marriage to death and the underworld: "If he be married, / My grave is like to be my wedding-bed" (1.5.134-35). That suggestion resounds through the remainder of the play: "earth hath swallowed all my hopes but she," says her father (1.2.14); "I would the fool were married to her grave!" adds her mother (3.5.140). Even the final offer of golden statues echoes what Hades' underworld offers, in several versions of the myth, in compensation for the rape of Proserpina.

In his associations with sycamore trees and westward darkness, in his vampire-like aversion to the light, Romeo from the beginning seems to belong to the classical underworld (1.1.121-22, 138). "Give me my Romeo, and when I shall die..." (3.2.21), says Juliet, anticipating his arrival upon their wedding night and yet intimating a link, beyond the erotic pun, between Romeo and her own mortality. When Juliet is told,

shortly thereafter, that he has indeed proven to be an agent of death, she says that news belongs “in dismal hell” (3.2.44), and then goes on to depict him as a “serpent heart” among the flowers, a “dragon” in a “fair...cave” (ll. 73-4), a potential Hades-figure destroying an Edenic garden-scene, invading innocent flesh, dragging nature down into the dark underworld: “O nature, what hadst thou to do in hell / When thou didst bower the spirit of a fiend / In mortal paradise of such sweet flesh?” (ll. 80-82). So it is appropriate for her to conclude, despairingly, “death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead” (ll. 137). Symbolically, there is not much difference.<sup>35</sup>

These Hades-Proserpina references culminate when Juliet is found seemingly dead on her wedding morning:

LORD CAPULET: Death lies on her like an untimely frost

Upon the sweetest flower of all the field.

\* \* \* \* \*

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.

(4.5.28-39)

Even Romeo, who earlier dreamed of being “an emperor” among the dead (5.1.9), echoes the allusion when he finds her beautiful body down in the Capulet tomb:

Shall I believe

That unsubstantial Death is amorous,

And that the lean abhorred monster keeps  
Thee here in dark to be his paramour?  
For fear of that, I still will stay with thee,  
And never from this palace of dim night  
Depart again. (5.3.102-08)

Death, too, begins to look like a rapist, stealing women's bodies in the darkness, erasing their will. Henry Chettle's *Englands Mourning Garment* (1603) urges the shepherd to "remember our Elizabeth, / And sing her Rape, done by that Tarquin, Death" (35-36).

The messenger-god Hermes in the Proserpina story arrives moments too late to redeem her completely from the "palace of dim night," the royal family of the dead: she has already tasted its fruit.<sup>36</sup> But, as in the myth, there is a distinct metaphysical and metatheatrical suggestion that she may spring back up to life in some next cycle, as Juliet does not only in the tomb, but also in every new production of the play. In other words, the associations with the rape of Proserpina amplify the noble, as well as ignoble, possibilities of a play where undying love and violent death are constantly striving to surround and suppress each other, where comedy and tragedy compete for the authority to frame this as a story either of renewal or of termination. The notion of Romeo as Hades may suggest he is a ravisher who destroys his bride, but it also contributes to a pattern of redemptive hints that he carries her, or really they carry each other, to another world on the other side of some ultimate barrier. This would be not rape, but rapture.

In this world, however, Italy's the right place for rape, according to Shakespearean drama<sup>37</sup> – and even prospective husbands are sexual suspects. When Lavinia's gallant young fiancé carries her away to prevent a dynastic marriage that her father was imposing, in Shakespeare's previous tragedy, he is accused of rape, and has to answer, "Rape call you it, my lord, to seize my own, / My true betrothed love, and now my wife?" (*Titus Andronicus* 1.1.405-6). He is also like Romeo in being compared to Actaeon (2.3.63), the man with the violating gaze.

The discrepancy between Lord Capulet's protestations to Paris and his practices with Juliet in 3.5.141-95 remind us only too clearly of the element of coercion behind even seemingly consensual matches for aristocratic young women in this period. The play -- like several other prominent dynastic-marriage dramas in the period, from *The Spanish Tragedy* to Webster's great tragedies -- effectively unravels the myth of "consent" (as at 1.2.17), hinting that marriage often entailed a degree of rape (though it is important to remember that the modern concern about marriage as a way of achieving rape was less noticeable four hundred years earlier than concern about rape as a way of achieving marriage, since a woman known to have been violated became hard to wed to anyone but her violator, and widows could sometimes be compelled to marry their attackers – both facts which men used to enforce profitable matches<sup>38</sup>). In Robert Mead's "The Combat of Love and Friendship," Melesippus tells his daughter that, though he hopes she will accept his choice, it is "No Marriage; but a well nam'd Rape, where friends / Force Love upon their Children; where the Virgin / Is not so truly given, as betraid" (l.iv). Sebastian in Cyril Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedie* (1611) makes the point even more directly: "Why what is't but a Rape to force a wench to

marry, / Since it forces her to lie with him she would not?" (I.i). George Rivers's *The Heroïnæ* (1639), observes that "Dido refused marriage, shee could not love. Marriage to her had been a rape, another had enjoy'd her against her will: if a rape must bee avoyded with the losse of life; through how many death must she flie a loathed bed, where every night she shall be ravished?" (p. 88/91). This enforcement makes an even more disturbing spectacle when the enforcer is the father, often insisting (as in classical comedy) that the daughter marry someone close to himself in age; it is hard to say whether the tradition of powerful theatrical fathers such as Theophilus Cibber and Charles Kemble playing Romeos to their daughters' Juliets was an effort to acknowledge or to preclude the transgressive aspects of the play's sexuality.

Conceivably playing in Shakespeare's mind, as he imagined Lord Capulet's anguish about Juliet, was Agamemnon's anguish about his daughter in Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*: "And for this poor maid--why maid? Death, methinks, will soon make her his bride--how I pity her! ... Alas! to what utter ruin Paris, the son of Priam, the cause of these troubles, has brought me...."<sup>39</sup> In the history of sexuality as told to the Renaissance, a princely figure named Paris (as "The Rape of Lucrece" reminds us at some length [ll.1471 ff.]) carried a lovely young woman off from her legitimate husband. In both stories, Paris thus occupies a middle category: not exactly a rapist in the obvious criminal sense – though he was often listed alongside more egregious rapists<sup>40</sup> -- but also someone using force to take a woman forcibly to his bed, with destructive consequences (and Shakespeare's Lucrece reproves him for committing a violation out of "lust" [l. 1473], while *Troilus and Cressida* calls him "wanton Paris" sleeping with "the ravish'd Helen" [Pro. 9-10]). For both Helen and Juliet, though in inverse ways, the

figure of Paris ultimately asks at what cost a woman can – by giving or withholding consent -- defy the marriage demanded by the social order.

Brooke's poem emphasizes this onomastic connection, for when Romeus attends the Capilets' Christmas party (not to be confused with the Capulets' midsummer feast), he glimpses Juliet:

At length he saw a mayd, right fayre of perfect shape  
Which Theseus, or Paris would have chosen to their rape.<sup>41</sup>

This couplet seems especially abrupt if we come to it, as most all of us do, from Shakespeare's tragedy. What Theseus (whose notorious perfidy with women is recalled in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*)<sup>42</sup> or Paris (tampered jurist, wife-abductor, war-inciter) should be doing here, at the precise moment of origin of this exemplary relationship of true love, is therefore disturbing to contemplate. Several versions of Helen's story report that -- as a very young woman, long before Paris did the same -- she was carried off by Theseus, who later went on a disastrous expedition to kidnap Persephone (with whom we have seen Shakespeare persistently associating Juliet) from Hades. George Turberville's 1567 version of *The Heroycall Epistles of ... Publius Ovidius Naso* offers this tale in a way that again blurs the boundary between rape and Paris's abduction of Helen:

Cause Theseus wrongde me once,  
well worthie am I deemde  
To be a Ruffians rape againe,  
and so to be esteemde?  
The guilt was mine if I  
allured were to yll:  
But so I rapted were by force,  
what coulde I doe but nill? (Epistle XVI, lines 41-48)

Shakespeare evokes the tangle of consent and coercion for a young woman in his society with this maze of allusions.

Brooke does not exactly say that Romeus is like-mindedly a rapist, but the energies released by the classical references, and by the rhyme that joins the perfection of Juliet's body with the idea of its violation, suggest that characteristics within Romeus are here being emblematically expressed. (Later in Brooke's poem, when Juliet has feigned agreement with the plan to marry Paris, she tells her mother that she will seek to please her new husband by wearing "the bravest garments and the richest jewels" she owns, "for if I did excel the famous Grecian rape, / Yet might attire helpe to amende my bewty and my shape," echoing the rhyme that communicated Romeus' love at first sight, and expressing Juliet's awareness of her bigamous predicament.)<sup>43</sup>

Now, clearly, evidence against Brooke's Romeus should not be admissible in a trial of Shakespeare's Romeo, any more than Trojan Paris's actions should be held against County Paris. Nonetheless an array of details from the *Tragicall Historye* confirms the cultural reasons why Juliet, in both poem and play, might well be wary of any wooer, let alone a gate-crashing Montague. Interpreting Shakespeare through his sources is, of course, a tricky task. Finding the secret meaning of a play precisely in what Shakespeare chooses to mute or omit seems perverse, though there could be an ironic production of meaning in the audience if the source's story were well known (as Brooke's poem was),<sup>44</sup> and value to the self-delighting playwright's mind even if it was obscure. Some subliminal residue seems plausible in this heavily allusive artistic culture. Since all that this residue needs to suggest is a repressed impulse in Romeo, or repressed fear in Juliet, a thin association may nonetheless be sufficient and

noteworthy. Indeed, scholarly exposition of the plays may resemble (though many suspect quite the opposite) the normal workings of the human mind, which navigates through the internal and external complexities of human experience by a layering of allusions, of stories of varying degrees of proximity and vividness, most of them indirectly inherited, that tell us what to want and what to fear.

In thus naming and situating Paris, Brooke and Shakespeare pass on their sources' conflation of the notorious classical seizer of women with the general figure of the unwanted husband.<sup>45</sup> In the fights over Juliet, furthermore, Shakespeare conflates the main ways Renaissance women were denied subjectivity and choice in the process of courtship: by their treatment as objects of exchange and competition among men, and by deprivation of their consent in the choice of spouses (though this was a problem for men also) and of sexual relations with those spouses.<sup>46</sup> According to Ovid, Venus actively promotes Prosperina's rape as advantageous to Venus's dynastic ambitions, ordering Cupid to aim at Dis: "And wherefore then should only Hell still unsubdued stand? / Thy mothers Empire and thine own why doste thou not advaunce?"<sup>47</sup> As if to focus on the element of rape in the enforcement of marriage, Juliet's solution to the proposed match with Paris echoes the pleas of most women faced with rape in classical and Renaissance literature:

O, bid me leap, rather than marry Paris,  
From off the battlements of any tower  
...chain me with roaring bears  
Or hide me nightly in a charnel house,  
O'ercover'd quite with dead men's rattling bones...

Or bid me go into a new-made grave,  
And hide me with a dead man in his shroud.

(4.1.77-85)

And the friar does then manage to give her death and entombment as the only way to stave off Paris's amorous intentions.<sup>48</sup> From there on her body becomes an object of adoration while she remains absolutely passive, though actually inwardly alive (the necrophiliac appeal of the ending is another force drawing the audience into fantasies of something like rape).

Even Paris's attack on Romeo at the Capulet tomb seems founded on the suspicion that Romeo intends to perform some necrophiliac violence (or vandalism) against Juliet's helpless corpse, "to do some villainous shame / To the dead bodies" (5.3.52-53). It is not an unfounded fear, given the commonplace association between womb and tomb, and especially if (as happens so often in Shakespearean tragedy) he partly overhears the worst of Romeo's words, in which he tells Balthasar that he has come "partly to behold my lady's face, / But chiefly to take thence from her dead finger / A precious ring -- a ring that I must use / In dear employment" (5.3.29-32). *The Merchant of Venice* shows that Shakespeare assumed an association between wedding rings and female genitalia; in *Titus Andronicus* he has Martius say, of the corpse of a man whose wife has just been raped, "Upon his bloody finger he doth wear / A precious ring that lightens all this hole" (2.3.226-27); and Middleton's *The Changeling* confirms what sexual import English Renaissance playwrights could convey by amputated ring-bearing fingers.<sup>49</sup> The same rather banal synecdoche appears here in the gendered pair of suicides, one by cup and one by sword; the Capulets have every reason to believe, at

5.3.205, that Romeo has stabbed her, and even our knowledge that this was suicide rather than murder makes her destiny, her choice, only further resemble that of Lucrece.

The way Romeo continues from there is, however, even more ominously vague:

But if thou, jealous, dost return to pry

In what I farther shall intend to do,

By heaven I will tear thee joint from joint,

And strew this hungry churchyard with thy limbs.

The time and my intents are savage-wild.

(5.3.33-37)

So dark a secret must surely suggest, to a half-informed observer such as Paris – as to Fernando at a notably parallel moment in John Ford's *Love's Sacrifice*<sup>50</sup> -- the prospect of Juliet's posthumous rape by the prying Romeo.

### III

Rape is thus the threat encompassing and permeating the physical actions, the psychological tensions, and the classical allusions of what is widely deemed the ultimate love story. Even among the male characters, the relationships (particularly in performance) seem to take on strong overtones of sexual aggression, ranging from sexual teasing to playful wrestling to the deadly serious phallic violence of swordfights.<sup>51</sup> The problem is that rape is hardly less complex or historically determined than sexuality in general: it appears in various guises and various degrees. Modern commentators have been understandably reluctant to address this problem, but Renaissance playwrights – negotiating a culture whose notions of rape were multiple and changing –

repeatedly juxtapose the different forms and severities of compulsion (including prostitution) by which women were deprived of sexual choice: compare the way *Romeo and Juliet* places socio-economically compelled marriage alongside dishonest seduction and more direct physical violence, with the various impingements on women's erotic will in Middleton's *Women Beware Women* and *The Changeling*, Jonson's *Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair*, Marston's *Sophonisba*, or Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*.

Shakespeare's Paris – named after a famous quasi-rapist, and himself unwittingly attempting a quasi-rape -- may either point up or channel off Romeo's associations with rape. Similarly, one could either defend or prosecute Romeo by acknowledging that standard courtship, manipulative seduction, underage marriage, offensive peeping, actionable stalking, and criminal rape are parts of a continuum of male sexual aggression, however sharply and rightly we might want to moralize and legislate the difference between the extremes of that continuum. It is not just by chance, then, that Friar Lawrence's observation about how the same herbs can be medicine or poison, depending on the dosage, leads directly into his efforts to evaluate Romeo's sudden passion for Juliet. There is certainly a crucial difference between "grace" and "rude will"—indeed, they are "opposed"—but both "encamp them still / In man" (2.3.27-28). Romeo is undeniably announcing a deep—and more importantly, a requited—love when he tells the Friar:

but come what sorrow can,  
It cannot countervail the exchange of joy  
That one short minute gives me in her sight...

Then love-devouring death do what he dare,  
It is enough I may but call her mine.

(2.6.3-8)

Yet Tarquin or Tereus could sincerely have said the same.

Of course we are not claiming that Romeo—even to the extent one deems him a complete and independent being rather than a mere dramatic character—is guilty of rape in the modern sense; only that Juliet might have reason to doubt his innocence and question the honor of his intentions. Our understanding of this latent guilt is much like Edward Snow’s perception that Romeo’s “metaphors of grief” suggest “a fantasy of oral retaliation against the withdrawn, depriving maternal breast”—a fantasy of violence against the female body that “does not so much enter Romeo’s psyche as take its place in the haunted male background which the gentleness of his own love stands out against but never entirely exorcises.”<sup>52</sup> Robert Appelbaum observes that, “because of our current difficulty in discussing the structure of masculinity without putting it on trial and pronouncing it guilty, our experience of tragic subjectivity in Shakespeare has been unable to find a suitable critical vocabulary.”<sup>53</sup> The same problem encumbers the search for a vocabulary of erotic aggression.

Much more could of course be said here to historicize the crime of rape.<sup>54</sup> But what about historicizing our discussion of it? What here could not have been written thirty years ago, when feminist scholars began excavating analyses of sexist violations from the depths of Shakespearean drama?<sup>55</sup> Perhaps it is enough to say that, for whatever reason, this particular piece of that story went (to the best of our knowledge) unwritten; perhaps the implication that specters of rape hover over even the most

youthful and charming courtships would have been so unpopular and deterministic as to abet the social advocacy such criticism often sought to perform. But even the most transcendent-romantic reading of the play's bloody ending may remind us that, in the biological scheme, the necessary prelude to new birth may look disturbingly like an act of physical violence.

Why, then, has Romeo remained a fugitive from gender-justice so long, while Leontes and Hamlet and several Claudios sat glumly in the dock hearing their indictments? The easy answer is that Romeo is innocent. The hard truth, though—however prettily the nightingale may sing it—is that the world is not, and that the lover and the rapist are often separated by exactly the kind of reassuring conventional boundary that Shakespearean drama is always threatening to blur. Banquo dreams of committing Macbeth's crime, and Macduff is suspected of complicity in it. The plays are part of an unacknowledged legislation of the world that takes account even of those crimes that occur only in the desiring and fearful minds of potential perpetrators and victims, where they appear as uneasy dreams of a personal future that can be articulated only in terms of the collective past.

The feud has trapped these lovers outside the social rules, leaving them dangerously, exhilaratingly free to invent their own; but they are not outside the culture, whose landmarks they still must use to navigate. There is nothing so unusual about the ways Juliet (at 1.5.110) and Friar Lawrence (at 2.3.88) try to tease Romeo out of his bookish wooings; anti-Petrarchan satire was commonplace. What makes this instance unusually compelling is the persistent question of whether the lovers, having broken free from the scripts of facile erotic complaint, can pull free also from more grandly

tragic precedents. Like Lorenzo and Jessica at the beginning of the fifth act of *Merchant of Venice*, they can test their own situation only by brushing against tragic erotic touchstones such as Troilus and Cressida, Pyramus and Thisbe, Dido and Aeneas – maybe even Tarquin and Lucrece, Hades and Proserpina, and Paris and Helen.

Our main critical point, then, is how often *Romeo and Juliet* alludes to rape, in all the different ways Renaissance law and literature defined it; our meta-critical point is how diligently commentary on the play has looked away from those allusions. Not much in a major Shakespeare play has gone unexamined by simple carelessness; so this gap in the discussion of a play in which a young woman is about to be forcibly carried off to a bigamous bed by a man named Paris, and is then repeatedly associated with Proserpina carried off to bed against her will by Hades, seems worth remarking – even if she did not also echo Philomel and Lucrece. A small but representative instance of the averted (or distracted) gaze of criticism is the fact that neither the *Variorum* nor any standard modern edition of *Romeo and Juliet* remarks the special Ovidian charge Shakespeare achieves by locating an (imaginary) nightingale on a pomegranate tree in the Capulet orchard on the morning after the couple's sexual initiation. Commentary instead looks to ornithology, folklore, travelers' tales, or "poetic tradition" for an explanation of this line.<sup>56</sup>

A meta-meta-critical incident may help to explain this blindspot. This article was previously submitted to another distinguished journal, where a reader report scoffed at our reference to "phallic violence" ("I think they mean 'sex'," it suggested, though our point was the amalgamation of Romeo's deeds with Juliet and with Tybalt), while deciding that, by the "sexual aggression" involved in mating, we must really have meant

“rape.” This determination to push all male sexual activity into one of two perfectly distinct categories (for which we must just have forgotten the words) is exactly the kind of erotic essentialism we were trying to resist, what we were arguing that the play resists. The other reader more openly objected to our failure to assert clear divisions among things called lovers, husbands, and rapists: “It is really important to recognize the distinction between seduction, courtship, and rape, even, or especially, when arguing that the culture works to elide them.” Yet we had been quite explicitly arguing exactly the opposite: that the culture, as is morally imperative, works to distinguish these things, which in experience can often be murky and shifting -- especially for a young person alone in the middle of them, deciding from moment to moment what to attempt and what to permit, how to send and how to read the often intricate and paradoxical signals of the human mating-dance. The play persistently reminds its audience that people have to try to navigate by clear cultural markers -- Is my suitor actually Petrarch or actually Tereus? -- even while knowing that neither is likely to tell the whole story reliably. Whether Romeo is to be regarded as lover, husband, or rapist, depends on what each on-stage observer knows and does not know at that particular moment; exactly the same can be said of his rival Paris (and of the Trojan Paris as well).

Since we had tried not to write obscurely, we conclude that something else was obscuring our argument. This something sounded like indignation, not only at our failure to emphasize the romantic aspect of the play (in which the culture has an enormous investment, but which we therefore thought hardly needed reiterating), but also at our rejection of the fantasy that there is nothing between the benign melting-together of

angelic lovers (as in Donne's "Air and Angels" and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, devoid of any element of physical aggression or potential exploitation) and sub-bestial attacks (as on Lucrece and Lavinia).<sup>57</sup>

Acknowledging middle cases which can be viably erotic while still entailing physical aggression is risky, because many rapists have doubtless exploited it to escape their due punishment; we trust it is clear that we are neither denying nor justifying the fact of rape. But do these risks really justify steadfastly or reflexively averting our eyes from deep questions this play so forcefully raises? As with so many of Shakespeare's other politically disquieting moments (on race and class as well as gender), perhaps it is time we moved from silent censorship to an open confrontation with the issues – issues which the plays doubtless raise for their audiences whether or not we like or admit it. The availability of a romantic reading did not automatically, in the Renaissance, exclude the threat of what they called rape; indeed, rape often led to marriage with a complacency now hard to fathom,<sup>58</sup> and one can hardly imagine a more gorgeous evocation of poetically conventional male erotic desire than the one Shakespeare provides for Tarquin as he prepares to rape Lucrece.

Renaissance literature reflected a legal principle that women slip into complicity with a rapist if they experience any pleasure (or conceive a child) during the act.<sup>59</sup> Though we now find that idea quite objectionable, scientifically as well as politically, it does mirror an important feminist argument that consensual sex can become rape during the act; and this kind of psychological vacillation of consent does not disappear from erotic experience just because we fear the consequences of acknowledging it. In an influential Renaissance analysis, Salutati explained Lucrece's suicide as partly the

result of her anguished recognition that she found some pleasure, however unwilling, in the rape, and therefore partook of its guilt. The pain of the sword serves to renounce and thus cancel any pleasure of the phallus.

This association has a long, uneasy cultural history, not unlike the one we have attributed to rape itself:

Because rape takes place physically and psychologically *inside*, it is, as Mieke Bal explains, "by definition imagined; it can only exist as experience and as memory, as image translated into signs, never adequately objectifiable. . . .

Because of this difficulty in representing rape, its depiction is often displaced; it is then depicted as self-murder, as in Lucretia's case where self-murder stands for rape, the suicide becoming its metaphor." The figuring of rape through the image of suicide is perhaps most conspicuous in the paintings of the period. Although paintings depict separately the rape and the suicide, the weapon with which Tarquin initially threatens Lucrece always prefigures the weapon she will later use in her suicide, just as the weapon of suicide re-presents or stands in for Tarquin's weapon and the phallus it symbolizes.<sup>60</sup>

Juliet finally takes command of this destructive legacy, as she earlier had appropriated Tarquin's impatience for the dark night and its sexual energies (3.2.1-31). She reclaims pleasure by consensual death with Romeo; she brings together, reclaims as her own will, the darkest edge of sexual violence in welcoming Romeo's "happy dagger" into what she calls (as Lucrece did in the parallel moment, 1723-4) the "sheath" of her body. By attending to the complex weave of sex, power, and violence in the play (rather than

trying to deny it), we can see Juliet forcibly re-arranging it to meet the needs of the moment – her moment, but one shared (if only in metaphorical or milder form) by many other women, then and now.

The same blurring of the boundaries distinguishing courtship, seduction, rape, and marriage is a prominent feature of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the play Shakespeare was most likely writing simultaneously with *Romeo and Juliet*. When Shakespeare revises “The Knight’s Tale” into *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Chaucer’s clear “distinction between licit sexual intercourse and rape is virtually obliterated.”<sup>61</sup> Do we know that Caliban’s actions toward Miranda were any more violent than, say, Silvius’ toward Phoebe? (The difference between the heroically/romantically persistent wooer, and the criminally persistent one, is rightly in the eyes of the person being courted, but may be hard – or in cases of racism, too easy – for others to see.) Did Katharine in *Henry V*, or even Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, have much more choice about her sex-partner than Lucrece in “The Rape of Lucrece” or Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*? Does it resolve the problem to assume that the former two will find more pleasure in and after the consummation than the latter two, or does that push us back toward the repugnant old suggestion that a woman should seek pleasure even in imposed sex acts, and the hardly less repugnant old legality that acquitted men of rape if the woman ended up taking any pleasure or bearing any progeny from those acts?

If we do not acknowledge the ancient specter of rape haunting this story, we cannot recognize what Juliet does to exorcise it. The insistence that male erotic desire is always categorically either perfectly inoffensive or a criminal offense finally serves some urgent feminist causes no better than the division of women into madonnas and

whores. Nor does it serve very well the cause of this great Shakespearean tragedy, which depends for both its pity and its fear on the recognition that Juliet must find her own way into the uncertain meaning of her own uncertain story, and pay for her final triumph over such categories with her life.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Shakespeare's works follow *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> References to Actaeon are especially noticeable in Shakespeare's Elizabethan comedies. As Leonard Barkan has shown, Shakespeare draws on the Actaeon myth clearly in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and extensively in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; see "Diana and Actaeon: The Myth as Synthesis," *English Literary Renaissance* 10 (1980), 317-59. *Twelfth Night* 1.1.18-22 also conspicuously alludes to Actaeon's transformation without naming him directly, and Robert N. Watson, "As You Liken It: Simile in the Wilderness," *Shakespeare Survey* 56 (2003) argues for the importance of the myth in *As You Like It*.

<sup>3</sup> See Arthur Brooke, *The Tragicall Historie of Romeus and Juliet*, ll. 468-69. Subsequent references to this work are to *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough, 8 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 1:284-363.

<sup>4</sup> Thinking of himself as the even more tongue-tied Actaeon would allow Romeo partly to excuse his obvious prying into Capulet affairs. Actaeon's glimpse of Diana was accidental—he was out hunting and, as Juliet might say, stumbled on Diana's counsels—and his punishment was therefore the result not of "desart / But cruell Fortune" (3.164-65). (This and subsequent references to Golding's 1567 translation are to *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, ed. John Frederick Nims [rpt. Philadelphia: Paul Dry, 2000].)

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Such a formulation later proves attractive to Romeo after he kills Tybalt and exoneratingly proclaims himself "Fortune's fool" (3.1.136).

<sup>5</sup> Brooke, ll. 440ff. The gloss is Bullough's, 297.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Coke, *The Second Part of the Institutes of the Laws of England*, chapter 13; subsequent references add castration to the blinding, but that the initial reference is to blinding seems remarkable.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, *The Changeling*, ed. George Walton Williams, *Regents Renaissance Drama Series* (London: Edward Arnold, 1967), 1.1.230.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from *Elizabethan Sonnets*, ed. Maurice Evans (London: Dent, 1977), 164.

<sup>9</sup> When Romeo specifically imagines "carrion flies" that "may seize/On the white wonder of dear Juliet's hand,/And steal immortal blessing from her lips" (3.3.35-7) it is difficult to avoid seeing her as a fly-blown corpse who is simultaneously the object of courtship. We have moved, here, disturbingly graveward from the frolickings of Lesbia's sparrow, in Catullus, and its avian descendants in amorous verse where the wooer envies the bird's access to the beloved. The fuller implications of Romeo's necrophiliac nuance, and of the idea of a Juliet who is always in some sense dead, will be developed later in this article.

<sup>10</sup> Franco Zeffirelli's film of 1968 develops this confrontation in strongly physical ways when an initially flirtatious Nurse undergoes what is arguably a stylized and slapstick stripping and gang-rape by Mercutio and other not-so-gentle men of Verona. Mercutio lifts her skirt from behind, feigns the escape of malodors therefrom, yanks her

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huge veil about during the hoar/hare/whore flyting, then removes it altogether and wears it as a kind of false bosom as though having exposed and captured her body. The Nurse is left, with a kiss, knocked down on the stairs in the public square. The scene as a whole visually and performatively foreshadows the duel between Mercutio and Tybalt, fought in the same place and similarly surrounded by onlookers, and thus links sex, violence, and intermittent comedy—riot and laugh-riot—much as the play’s opening dialogue does.

<sup>11</sup> See Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 179. Certainly the well-read Juliet in Brooke’s *Tragically Historye* worries that the literary odds almost assure her wooer’s treachery: “A thousand stories more, to teache me to beware, / In Boccace, and in Ovids bookes too playnely written are” (ll. 393-94).

<sup>12</sup> For example, see Arthur Gorges, from *Lucans Pharsalia* (1614): “If they by fight away would scape, / With your sharp blades their bosomes rape.” (Book IV, 359-60)

<sup>13</sup> A more extended version of this parallel occurs in *Twelfth Night*, where two unmanly suitors flee a duel before blood can be shed—suggesting the fears preventing Orsino and Olivia from achieving marital consummations—only to yield to true bloodshed and marital consummation when the truly masculine Sebastian replaces the faux-masculine Cesario in brawl and then in bed.

<sup>14</sup> Capulet’s horrified “O heavens! O wife, look how our daughter bleeds!” (5.3.202) similarly registers the confusing and tragic simultaneity of Juliet’s maturation, consummation, and demise. While much of the language of the play’s close shows the

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characters trying to lodge Romeo and Juliet in the sterilized past of narrative, Capulet's present tense demands public attention to the ongoing, active messiness of the catastrophe.

<sup>15</sup> Such fears echo onward into John Quarles's "Tarquin Banished: or, the Reward of Lust" (1655), where Lucretia finds that her "table fed a Serpent, not a Dove" – terms Juliet applies to Romeo at 3.2.73-6 – and where Tarquin's response to banishment markedly resembles that of Romeo in 3.3. It is decided that Tarquin's sentence "should not be speedy death, but...a sad and lasting banishment":

This news arriving unto Tarquin's ears  
He soon begins to argue with his fears:  
Must I be sent, cryes he, into a place  
Of no society, and there imbrace  
    Perpetual woe? Oh! How could Hell contrive  
    So great a plague to keep me still alive?  
What shall I doe in this extreme abysse  
Of woe and torments? Death had been a blisse  
Beyond expression...

Romeo also claims to prefer death as "merciful" (3.3.12) compared to banishment, which he likens to "purgatory, torture, hell itself" (18). This cluster of associations, established by verbal and circumstantial allusion, may suggest that, by the seventeenth century, aspects of Romeo and Tarquin have become vaguely conflated within the cultural memory.

<sup>16</sup> Brooke, ll. 385-88.

<sup>17</sup> Brooke, ll. 389-92.

<sup>18</sup> Brooke, ll. 1114, 1126.

<sup>19</sup> As in Brooke, ll. 1126ff.

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<sup>20</sup> John Barton, *Playing Shakespeare* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 32.

<sup>21</sup> Brooke, ll. 1591-94.

<sup>22</sup> Brooke, ll. 1651-54.

<sup>23</sup> *Aristotle's Master-Piece*, a notably "popular text on reproductive biology" from the period, warns parents to raise their girls carefully, because "most of all the Virgins, when they grow up to be marriageable, for if through the unnatural severity of rigid Parents they be crossed and frustrated in their love, many of them, out of a mad humour, if temptation lies in their way, throw themselves into the unchaste Arms of a subtle, charming Tempter, being through the softness of good Nature, and strong Desire, to pursue their Appetites, easily induced to believe Men's Flatteries, and feigned Vows of promised Marriage, to cover the shame; and then too late the Parents find the effects of their rash Severity, which brought a lasting stain upon their Family"; quoted by Deborah G. Burks, "'I'll Want My Will Else': *The Changeling* and Women's Complicity with the Rapists," *ELH* 62 (1995), 769. Notice again how poorly the boundaries separating ordinary sexual desire and destructive sexual violation appear to have been marked.

<sup>24</sup> Catharine Stimpson cites "political or familial revenge" as "the common justification for rape"; see "Shakespeare and the Soil of Rape," in *The Woman's Part*, ed., Lenz, Greene, and Neely (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1983), 58.

<sup>25</sup> In Renaissance culture generally, as Williams demonstrates (pp. 105-108), the woman's willing death is the surest, perhaps the only, proof that she really had been raped.

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<sup>26</sup> Brooke, ll. 395-402.

<sup>27</sup> Brooke's sententious preface to the *Tragicall Historye* proclaims his virtuous intentions as an author, advertises the fact that his work contains adult material, and insists that Romeus and Juliet are lovers "thralling themselves to unhonest desire." Abetted by the Friar (friars are, Brooke remarks parenthetically, "the naturally fitte instruments of unchastitie") in "attemptyng all adventures of peryll for thattaynyng of their wished lust," the lovers come to "shamefull and wretched ends." From this, however, Brooke can "teach men to witholde them selves from the hedlong fall of loose dishonestie." See Bullough, 1:284-85.

<sup>28</sup> Carolyn Williams's impressive study begins by observing that "Brief allusions to rape occur throughout Shakespeare's work, combining maximum effect with minimum critical perturbation" (p. 93), but *Romeo and Juliet* provokes no mention – despite her recognition that "For Renaissance readers, the best-thumbed guide to ancient riots, incests, and rapes is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*" (p. 97).

<sup>29</sup> John Lyly, *Campaspe*, ed. G.K. Hunter, *The Revels Plays* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1991), 5.1.35-42.

<sup>30</sup> *Metamorphoses* 6:550.

<sup>31</sup> *Metamorphoses* 6:589-90.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Dalton, *The Countrey Justice* (London, 1618), p. 248, explains that "The taking away of a maide under sixteene yeares of age, without the consent of her parents or governors, of contracting marriage with her, or deflowering her, is no felony, but yet shall be punished with long imprisonment, without baile, or with grievous fine."

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Coke concludes his chapter on rape by noting that marrying a woman below the age of consent without her parents' endorsement falls under the same category. John Donne discovered unhappily that the society would not forbear punishing a seducer of an aristocratic young woman just because he was willing to marry her. Donne shows another way the category is elastic in this period, in his complaint that "Yong Beauties force our love, and that's a Rape" ("The Autumnall," line 3).

<sup>33</sup> Sig. H2r, lines 31-32 – cited by Mary Bly, "The Legacy of Juliet's Desire in the Comedies of the Early 1600s" *Shakespeare Survey* 49 (1996).

<sup>34</sup> Emily Detmer-Goebel asserts that "rape is the centerpiece of Shakespeare's fictional history of Rome"; "The Need for Lavinia's Voice: *Titus Andronicus* and the Telling of Rape," *Shakespeare Studies* 29 (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2001), 75-92.

<sup>35</sup> Kirby Farrell observes that "Romeo imagines Juliet sexually enslaved in the 'palace' of a 'monster' who is also a warrior-king. This fantasy projects the long-denied dark side of the patriarchal forms in which the lovers have construed each other. Romeo dissociates from himself as Death the part of him that would be made an emperor by Juliet's kiss. In this final moment of tenderness he rejects the devouring triumphalism latent in all patriarchy.... Otherwise, loving such an emperor-Romeo, Juliet would be submitting to rape like the women Sampson fancies 'ever thrust to the wall.'" See *Play, Death, and Heroism in Shakespeare* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1989), 144.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Porter explores the pertinence of Mercury (or Hermes) to Mercutio in, among other ways, his role as conductor of souls to Hades' underworld; see

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*Shakespeare's Mercutio: His History and Drama* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988).

<sup>37</sup> Stimpson, 57.

<sup>38</sup> Edward Coke, the great English jurist of Shakespeare's lifetime, reports this misfortune befalling two widows; cited by Burks, p. 768n23.

<sup>39</sup> Emrys Jones, *The Origins of Shakespeare* (Oxford UP, 1977), pp. 110-18 argues that Shakespeare drew on *Iphigenia at Aulis* in writing *Julius Caesar*, and a Latin translation had been published by no less prominent a figure than Erasmus at the start of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There is also reason to believe that Shakespeare knew the other Euripides play Erasmus then translated, the *Hecuba*.

<sup>40</sup> For example, see Robert Chester's "To the kind Reader" in the 1601 *Loves martyr*, which lists "Hellan's rape" and "Lucrece rape" in parallel. The crimes are similarly run together in Richard Johnson's *The seven Champions of Christendome*, Part 1 (1608), Chap. XV: "What became of Hellens rauishment, but the destruction of renowned Troy? What of Romane Lucreciaes rape, but the bannishment of Tarquin? and what of Prognies foule deflowrement by her sisters husband, the lustfull King of Thrace, but the bloudie banquet of his yong Son Itis, whose tender bodie they serued to his table baked in a Pie?"

<sup>41</sup> Brooke, ll. 197-98.

<sup>42</sup> See especially 2.1.74-80; furthermore, the entire opening scene of the play emphasizes that Theseus is taking a bride by force

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<sup>43</sup> Brooke, ll. 2235ff.

<sup>44</sup> See Bullough, 1:275.

<sup>45</sup> In her edition of the play (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) Jill L. Levenson notes that in Bandello's version of the tale, "in a rare moment of wordplay, Giulietta describes Count Paris of Lodrone as a thief ('ladrone') who steals another's property" (7).

<sup>46</sup> English legal history indicates that rape itself was evolving in the later 16<sup>th</sup> century from a theft of male property toward a violation of female erotic will. Carolyn D. Williams, "Silence, like a Lucrece knife," *Yearbook of English Studies* 23 (1993), pp. 99-100, reports that "The late sixteenth century is a watershed in rape law. From Anglo-Saxon times, rape was defined as the abduction of a woman against the will of her male guardian. Consent was often irrelevant; violation was a side-issue: the crime was essentially theft." But statutes in 1555 and 1597 broke rape and abduction into distinct offences. Detmer-Goebel (pp.75-78) explores the growing authority of women's testimonies as rape, and the victim of rape, became thus redefined in law. Though her discussion focuses on Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, it also indirectly illuminates the way Juliet's relatively isolated predicament informs her rhetorical choices in articulating both her desires and her fears. For more on these legal changes, see Nazife Bashir, "Rape in England between 1550 and 1700," in *The Sexual Dynamics of History: Men's Power, Women's Resistance*, ed. The London Feminist History Group (London: Pluto, 1983).

<sup>47</sup> *Metamorphoses* 5: 466-67.

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<sup>48</sup> Any wedding-night intercourse with Paris would be both unwilling and extramarital (thus placing it firmly in the category of rape, a charge from which marriage often gave husbands immunity). However decorously floral Paris's presence in the graveyard may be, it disquietingly displaces his intentions for the wedding-night, when she was to "rest but little," not in peace.

<sup>49</sup> In 3.4, De Flores continues his digital assault on Beatrice by presenting her with Alonzo's severed finger, on which sparkles the diamond ring she had been forced to send her unwelcome wooer. A complex sexual bargaining ensues: though De Flores gets the ring for his murderer's fee, his symbolic castration of a rival and demand for Beatrice's virginity turns the scene into, among other things, the parodic wedding of a couple "engag'd so jointly" (89) by guilt, for which the unfortunate Alonzo serves as best man.

<sup>50</sup> Romeo here closely resembles the penitent Duke in Act V of *Loves sacrifice* (1633), who (sounding oddly like Romeo courting Juliet at the Capulet ball: "Peace and sweet rest sleep here; let not the touch / Of this my impious hand, prophane the shrine / Of fairest purity, which houers yet / About those blessed bones inhearst within") returns to the tomb of the beloved he has killed, only to be confronted by Fernando in the role Paris feels he must play:

*One goes to open the Tombe, out of which ariseth Fernando in his winding sheet, onely his face discouered; as Caraffa is going in, he puts him backe.*

*Fernando:*  
Forbeare; what art thou that dost rudely presse  
Into the confines of forsaken-graues?

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Has death no privilege? Com'st thou, *Caraffa*,  
To practise yet a rape upon the dead? Inhumane Tyrant;  
Whats' ever thou intend'st, know this place  
Is poynted out for my inheritance:  
Here lyes the monument of all my hopes.  
Had eager Lust intrunk'd my conquered soule,  
I had not buried living ioyes in death:  
Goe, Revell in thy pallace, and be proud  
To boast thy famous murthers: let thy smooth  
Low-fawning parasites renowne thy Act:  
Thou com'st not here. (395-407)

The fact that Ford seems to allude, extensively if parodically, to *Romeo and Juliet* in his *'Tis Pity She's A Whore* may lend extra weight to these comparisons.

<sup>51</sup> Though it is obviously a further reach, Romeo's speech to the Apothecary is oddly reminiscent of the sexual bullying in Lovelace's poem "The Fair Beggar"—a speech to a starving woman where seduction is again inextricable from extortion. Associating the young men's fights with sexual aggression has become standard practice in recent productions.

<sup>52</sup> Edward Snow, "Language and Sexual Difference in *Romeo and Juliet*," in *Shakespeare's Rough Magic*, ed. Peter Erickson and Coppélia Kahn (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1985), 187.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Appelbaum, "'Standing to the wall': The Pressures of Masculinity in *Romeo and Juliet*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48 (1997), 257.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Karen Bamford, *Sexual Violence on the Jacobean Stage* (New York: St. Martins, 2000); Jocelyn Catty, *Writing rape, writing women in early modern England : unbridled speech* (New York : St. Martin's Press, 1999); Diane Wolfthal, *Images of rape : the "heroic" tradition and its alternatives* (New York :

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Cambridge University Press, 1999); Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Brewer, 2001); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980); Lorraine Helms, *Seneca by Candlelight and other Stories of Renaissance Drama* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1997), esp. 77-91; Catherine Belsey, "Tarquin Dispossessed: Expropriation and Consent in *The Rape of Lucrece*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 52.3 (2001):315-35; and Sid Ray, "'Rape, I fear, was root of thy annoy': The Politics of Consent in *Titus Andronicus*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 49.1 (1998): 22-39.

<sup>55</sup> Andrea Dworkin's *Intercourse* (New York: Free Press, 1997) represents an extreme if noteworthy instance of radical-feminist conflation of eroticism with rape; a more recent wave of theory (including what has been called "lipstick feminism") objects that Dworkin's position tends to exclude or occlude heterosexual women's desire – exclude or occlude it in a way that Shakespeare, here and in *Othello*, clearly does not.

<sup>56</sup> Evans' *New Cambridge* and Levenson's *Oxford* editions briefly discuss the possible Philomel reference, but only to account for why Juliet's bird is female when it is, in nature, the male who sings. Levenson does note how thickly the play is textured with "allusions to unrelated Ovidian stories" (16), but confines the Proserpina legend to Romeo's speech about the unconscious Juliet as Death's "paramour" (5.3.105).

<sup>57</sup> Ironically, the same readers then accused us of overlooking "moral and poetic dimensionality," "the complex play of subjective positioning," and the more recent and sophisticated feminist arguments about sexuality. What we are trying to demonstrate is precisely that the literary qualities of the play evoke the moral complexity produced by

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conflicting subject-positions, by conflicts implicit in the codes of courtship, by the conflicts within women's desire, and by the layered poetic histories of dangerous love. For an example of the way this neat dichotomy hides (even from an outstanding Shakespeare critic) the play's disturbing suggestion that, as the violence has a sexual component, so the sexuality has a violent one, see Coppélia Kahn, "Coming of Age in Verona," in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana, IL: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980), p. 173: "*Romeo and Juliet* plays out a conflict between manhood as violence on behalf of fathers and manhood as separation from fathers and sexual union with women."

<sup>58</sup> See the instances explored by Suzanne Gossett, "Best Men Are Molded Out of Faults': Marrying the Rapist in Jacobean Drama," *English Literary Renaissance* (1984), 14(3), 305-327. Coke, chapter 13, discusses the problems – arising from the class system – with allowing a man to escape rape charges by offering to marry his victim.

<sup>59</sup> Foreste in D'Avenant's *The cruell brother* (1630) argues that

If compulsion doth insist, vntill  
Enforcement breed delight, we cannot say,  
The femall suffers. Acceptance at the last,  
Disparageth the not consenting at the first:  
Calls her deniall, her vnskilfulnesse;  
And not a virtuous frost i'th' blood. (V.i)

For the legal version of this argument, see Dalton, p. 248: "If the woman at the time of the supposed rape, doe conceive with child, by the ravishor, this is no rape, for a woman cannot conceive with child, except she do consent."

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<sup>60</sup> Barbara Baines, ("Effacing Rape in Early Modern Representation," *ELH* 65.1 [1998], 69-98), 90, quoting Mieke Bal, "The Rape of Lucrece and the Story of W," in *Reclamations of Shakespeare*, ed. A.J. Hoenselaars (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1994), 81. Most of this essay also appears in Bal's *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 60-93.

<sup>61</sup> Baines, 87; see also her discussion (76) of the way rape and seduction can be mistaken for each other by ahistorical readers; citing Mary R. Lefkowitz, "Seduction and Rape in Greek Myth," in *Consent and Coercion*, ed. Aseliki Laiou (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1993), 17-38, which argues that what have been called rapes in those myths are often to be understood (within the terms of their culture) as abduction or seduction instead. For an opposing view, see Leo C. Curran, "Rape and Rape Victims in *The Metamorphoses*," *Arethusa* 11 (1978): 213-39.