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Juliet Furens*: Shakespeare's* Romeo and Juliet *as Senecan Drama*

David Adkins

In what may be *Romeo and Juliet*'s most frightening moment, Juliet imagines what it might be like to awake in a crypt. Juliet's nightmarish fantasy reads as Senecan, owing not least to her vision of Tybalt's ghost, an element that derives ultimately from Bandello. But though Shakespeare's version of the speech closely follows its sources, where it is original it greatly expands upon their Senecanism, culminating with a memory of *Hercules Furens*: rather than imagine the dead dismembering her, as in Bandello, Boaistuau, and Brooke, Shakespeare's Juliet fears that she, like the mad Hercules, will desecrate the bodies of her family, plucking Tybalt's corpse from its shroud and wielding a human bone as a club. If the play becomes a tragedy with the deaths of Tybalt and Mercutio, it is here that it becomes Senecan tragedy, for the Roman playwright haunts *Romeo and Juliet* to its end, hence Juliet's Polyxena-like radiance before death. This essay argues that *Romeo and Juliet* – a play that rarely appears in discussions of Shakespeare's reception of Roman tragedy – channels the terror and fury of Senecan personae, but also an attitude toward death that looks beyond Stoic resignation and toward transcendence.

Keywords: Juliet, Shakespeare's Sources, Imagination, Ghosts, Hercules, Madness, Transcendence

Romeo and Juliet has never figured largely in discussions of Shakespeare's Senecanism. In the late nineteenth century, John William Cunliffe noted the similarity between Juliet's vision of the dead Tybalt in Act IV, scene iii and Medea's encounter with her brother's ghost (Cunliffe 1893, 45). A few modern critics have remarked in passing on the possible influence of Seneca, or Thomas Newton's 1581 translations of Seneca, on the play, pointing to its use of the classical chorus, its scenes of highly rhetorical lamentation, and how the Nurse and Juliet verbally echo the Nutrix and Phaedra in Seneca's *Hippolytus*[1].

1 See Hunter and Lichtenfels 2016, 13, 115 and Miola 1992, 181. In a *Notes & Queries* article, Anthony Brian Taylor notes that Juliet's "fiery-footed steeds" echoes John

But studies that focus on Shakespeare's reception of Seneca generally pass over *Romeo and Juliet* in favor of the other tragedies, all of which have received attention in light of their Senecanism[2]. Insofar as *Titus Andronicus* is Shakespeare's most overtly Senecan play, the criticism on Shakespeare and Roman tragedy has only confirmed G. K. Hunter's argument that Shakespeare wrote *Titus* and *Romeo and Juliet* to establish "the extreme polarities of his tragic range" (Hunter 1974, 2), an evaluation echoed in Stanley Wells' statement that "*Romeo and Juliet* stands at the opposite extreme from *Titus Andronicus*. That was a classical, this is a romantic tragedy" (Wells 1995, 76).

But we can grant the general truth of this insight and still acknowledge that *Romeo and Juliet* has its own scenes of terror that would be equally at home in *Titus Andronicus*. In what may be the play's most frightening moment, Juliet, alone in her bedroom, imagines what it might be like to awake in her family's crypt:

> Or if I live, is it not very like
> The horrible conceit of death and night,
> Together with the terror of the place –
> […]
> Where bloody Tybalt, yet but green in earth,
> Lies festering 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 –

Studley's "fiery footed horse" in his translation of Seneca's *Medea*, and that "too rash, too unadvised" echoes Medea's "O rash and unadvised foole" (Taylor 1987, 193-94). This article is the only work listed that has anything to do with Seneca in the section on *Romeo and Juliet* in *Shakespeare and the Classical Tradition: An Annotated Bibliography 1961-1991* (Walker 2002, 619-23). Jonathan Bate mentions Juliet in connection with Seneca's Stoic attitude to suicide (Bate 2019, 5). Gordon Braden does not address *Romeo and Juliet* in *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition* (Braden 1985), nor does Curtis Perry in *Shakespeare and Senecan Tragedy* (Perry 2021).

2 For instance, Curtis Perry covers *Titus*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Lear*, and *Coriolanus* (Perry 2021); Jonathan Bate covers (among others) *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, and *Anthony and Cleopatra* (Bate 2019, 46, 222-31, 233-51; on *Macbeth* see also Miola, 1992, 92-121). For *Timon of Athens* and its relationship to Seneca's *De Beneficiis*, see Wallace 1986, 349-63 and Finkelstein 2020, 801-25.

> O, if I wake, shall I not be distraught,
> Environed 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 desperate brains? (IV.iii.36-38, 42-45)[3]

The vision of Tybalt's ghost toward which the soliloquy builds is in fact only a small part of its richly Senecan texture. The mental scene that Juliet's imagination summons is thick with less obvious, but more interesting, Senecan ideas and associations. This essay first considers how Shakespeare reworks a passage in *Titus Andronicus* for Juliet's soliloquy, and then addresses how Shakespeare employs the source material in Bandello, Boaistuau, and Brooke to take advantage of their latent Senecanism: far from a mere pastiche of Brooke, the soliloquy in fact evokes specific moments from the ancient tragedian himself: Deïanira's doubts about the shirt of Nessus, Astyanax's live burial and death, and most powerfully, Hercules' madness as he brutally murders his wife and children. The essay concludes by suggesting that Seneca's presence remains in the play until the end, and that Shakespeare looks especially to Polyxena's sublime radiance before death as a model for a dramatic climax that joins tragedy to transcendence. The question Shakespeare continually raises in *Romeo and Juliet* is not whether the lovers' tragedy is Senecan, but what kind of Senecan tragedy it will be, and which Senecan personae Juliet will enact as she performs her "dismal scene". *Romeo and Juliet*, I argue, channels a distinctly Senecan dread, but also a Senecan defiance of death that arises less from Stoic resignation than from a (perhaps equally Stoic) commitment to the transcendent.

Romeo and Juliet *and* Titus Andronicus

The central idea of Juliet's soliloquy in IV.iii, the fear that her surroundings will be so horrifying that she will lose her sanity and die, recalls a densely Senecan moment in *Titus Andronicus*, when the Gothic queen Tamora in effect bewitches the idyllic Roman forest as she incites her sons to murder Bassianus and rape Lavinia, his bride:

3 Quotations of Shakespeare's plays are from *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works* (Shakespeare 2021).

> And when they showed me this abhorred pit,
> They told me here at dead time of the night
> A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes,
> Ten thousand swelling toads, as many urchins,
> Would make such fearful and confused cries
> As any mortal body hearing it
> Should straight fall mad, or else die suddenly. (*Titus Andronicus*, II.ii.98-104)

The *Titus* passage illustrates that the Senecanism of Juliet's soliloquy runs deeper than the tropes, rhetoric, and style common to any number of poets of the period. For Shakespeare evidently is composing the same kind of speech for Juliet that he (and Peele) had given to Tamora, a speech that directly imitates Senecan drama. Cunliffe notes that Tamora's speech is based on Seneca's *Thyestes*, specifically the description of the netherworldly grove where Atreus ritually slaughters Thyestes' sons (Cunliffe 1893, 70-71):

> hic nocte tota gemere ferales deos
> fama est, catenis lucus excussis sonat
> ululantque manes. quidquid audire est metus
> illic videtur; errat antiquis vetus
> emissa bustis turba et insultant loco
> maiora notis monstra. (*Thyestes*, 668-73)[4]
>
> (Here in the total darkness rumor has it that death gods groan; the grove resounds to the rattling of chains, and ghosts howl. Anything fearful to *hear* can be *seen* there. A hoary crowd walks abroad, released from their ancient tombs, and things more monstrous than any known caper about the place.)

A place for revenge and murder, the "barren detested vale" in *Titus* more exactly mirrors the dramatic situation of *Thyestes* than does Juliet's soliloquy. And yet there is reason to read that speech itself as bearing a direct relationship to the text of Seneca's drama. For arguably, Tamora's "thousand fiends" more weakly transfers the idea of a place haunted with ancestors' ghosts than does Juliet's worries about the "ancient receptacle / Where for this many hundred years the bones / Of all my buried ancestors are packed" (IV.iii.39-41), to-

4 Quotations and translations of Seneca's plays are from the recent Loeb edition (Seneca 2018). Where there are substantive differences, I print the text of a sixteenth-century edition (Seneca 1541) and adapt the translation accordingly.

gether with Tybalt's freshly festering body, as a place "where, as they say, / At some hours in the night spirits resort" (43-44). And if Tamora's fiends making "fearful and confused cries" "here at dead time of the night" are nearer to Seneca's gods groaning "hic nocte tota" (here in the total darkness) than anything in Juliet's speech, the latter's "as they say" hews closer to the sense of "fama est" than Tamora's "They told me", insofar as the former phrases, common in both Shakespeare and Latin poetry, always refer to rumor or popular tradition.

Demonstrating the relationship to not only Atreus' grove, but also to the place where Tiresias speaks to the dead Laius in Seneca's *Oedipus*, Curtis Perry argues that *Titus'* vale and its pit, which Tamora seems to create out of nothing, is Senecan psychologically as well as geographically. Part of the Senecan inheritance, he claims, was such subterranean caverns of the mind: "These arresting dramatic descriptions of secret psychological spaces […] provide an impetus for proto-gothic imagery in English drama, where secret interior spaces represent hidden and monstrous psychological depths" (Perry 2021, 209). This historical insight may illuminate *Romeo and Juliet*'s relationship to *Titus Andronicus*. Like Tamora, Juliet describes a real place yet transmogrifies its character through her strange powers of speech[5]. In the process she so bewitches herself that in the last four lines of her speech her vision suddenly advances out of the future and into her present, so that she sees – now, before her – Tybalt's restless shade: "O, look, methinks I see my cousin's ghost / Seeking out Romeo that did spit his body / Upon a rapier's point. Stay, Tybalt, stay!" (IV.iii.55-57).

In the event, the Capulet vault proves nothing like Juliet imagines, which is to say that the most frightening place in *Romeo and Juliet* is Juliet's mind. If the tomb is already a haunt for ghosts in the popular imagination ("where, as they say, / At some hours in the night spirits resort") it is in Juliet's mind that a scene of appalling deeds plays out in brutal and ghastly detail: Juliet plucking and playing with the dead's remains and shattering her own skull with a tall kinsman's bone. But note that Juliet herself is somewhat aware that the

5 Matthew Spellberg argues that "Juliet has a dream gone horribly wrong" because it "has infiltrated reality": "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" (Spellberg 2013, 80).

source of these fears lies within her. She says nothing about what the spirits may do to her; rather her fears all concern what she may do in response to the "horrible conceit of death and night, / Together with the terror of the place", a conceit and terror that draw power from the popular tradition about spirits in the night, whether or not that tradition is true. And perhaps Juliet is right to fear conceit, for this fantasy about losing her reason descends upon her with such force that her reason – in reality, in her bedroom – wavers as the vision of her cousin's ghost overpowers physical sight.

It is this idea that a horrible conceit may overthrow reason and drive one to madness that provides the passage's strongest connection to *Titus*. Tamora's description of the vale and its creatures that "make such fearful and confused cries / As any mortal body hearing it / Should straight fall mad, or else die suddenly" (II.ii.102-04) seems strangely gratuitous, since her sons have already agreed to the murder and rape; it is perhaps calculated to create a fitting atmosphere for those crimes which will transform the place into precisely the hell she has imagined it to be: Martius later refers to "this detested, dark, blood-drinking pit" (224) unknowingly repeating her very word: "A barren detested vale you see it is" (93). Stranger still, the boy Lucius repeats Tamora's idea that one may go mad under mental strain, this time applying it to the vale's real victim, Lavinia, as he tries to account for why she follows him, frightening one she loves:

> My lord, I know not, I, nor can I guess,
> Unless some fit or frenzy do possess her.
> For I have heard my grandsire say full oft
> Extremity of griefs would make men mad,
> And I have read that Hecuba of Troy
> Ran mad for sorrow. That made me to fear,
> Although, my lord, I know my noble aunt
> Loves me as dear as e'er my mother did,
> And would not but in fury fright my youth. (*Titus Andronicus,* IV.i.16-24)

Note that the young Lucius appeals to two sources of authority for this idea. He first defers to his grandfather, perhaps to the latter's experience, but perhaps also to his knowledge of popular tradition, insofar as "I have heard" echoes Tamora's "They told me" and Seneca's "fama est". But then the boy looks to his classical education, what he

has read in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the very book Lavinia presently will use to communicate what she has suffered.

Juliet also appeals to popular tradition, first to what she has heard about spirits congregating in her family's ancestral tomb, and likewise to what she evidently has heard about the sounds of mandrakes causing those who hear them to "run mad", which she mentions in a simile to describe the likely effect of the unidentified shrieks she expects to hear (IV.iii.47-48). Thus, whatever the occult properties of mandrakes, the point of comparison must be "horrible conceit", and once again the idea that an extremity of dread may drive one to madness, even when that dread corresponds to no external danger and arises solely in the mind. This phenomenon is of course real, but more importantly for Juliet's purposes, it was believed to occur after encounters with dead bodies. In the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton discusses the effects of fear in ways strikingly relevant to Juliet's situation; fear, he says, may cause insanity and hallucinations:

> It causeth many times suddaine madnesse […] Feare makes our Imagination conceaue what it list […]. We see this verified in most, as Lavater saith, Quae metunt [*sic*], fingunt, what they feare they conceaue and faigne vnto themselues, they thinke they see Goblins, Hagges, Divels, and many times become melancholy thereby[.] (Burton 1621, fol. I3r.)

And later he offers anecdotes about children whose encounters with corpses proved fatal:

> At Basil a many of little children in the Spring-time, went to gather flowres in a meddow, and at the townes end, where a malefactor hung in gibbets, all gazing at it, one by chance flung a stone, and made it stir, by which accident, all the children affrighted ran away; one slower then the rest, looking back, and seeing the stirred carcase wag towards her, cried out it came after her, and was so terribly affrigted, that for many dayes she could not be pacified, but melancholy, died. In the same towne another child beyond the Rhine, saw a graue opened, and vpon the sight of the carcase, was so troubled in mind, that she could not be comforted, but a little after died, and was buried by it. (Burton 1621, fol. N2v.)

Though fourteen come Lammas-eve, Juliet reasonably worries over what might happen to her mind should she drink the potion and wake next to her rotting cousin. Here as in *Titus*, a moment of dis-

tinctly Senecan dread (comprising Senecan language and conventions) gives occasion for exploring fears based in popular belief and historical experience.

But the young Lucius cites Ovid's Hecuba as well as his grandsire on this matter, and Juliet's apprehensions about her potential reaction to the tomb's horrors are as literary and, I suggest, as Senecan as those horrors themselves. The dead already haunt Juliet's imagination in the play's modern sources, which are themselves thoroughly Senecan in atmosphere, reason enough for Shakespeare to return to *Titus* for his version of the episode. Sensitive to this Senecanism, Shakespeare intensifies it; his handling of the prior tradition is less like the mellification of a beehive than the meticulous splicing in the cutting rooms of modern cinema. As we will see, his variations on the source material not only make Shakespeare's Juliet fundamentally different in character from her predecessors; each is also a departure toward a closer and more specific correspondence with Seneca, as Shakespeare aligns her character with various personae of Roman tragedy.

Modern Sources: Bandello, Boaistuau, Brooke

Shakespeare closely follows Arthur Brooke's *Romeus and Iuliet* in Juliet's soliloquy of Act IV scene iii – so closely that the passage has been dismissed as pastiche:

> Shakespeare remains Brooke's prisoner […]. The speech is a pastiche of bits and pieces rearranged from lines 2337-2400 of Brooke's poem, and, although Shakespeare concentrates the material and makes some incidental additions […] neither the additional material nor the speech as a whole rises imaginatively or emotionally much beyond Brooke's merely competent level. Somehow the moment failed to involve Shakespeare creatively. (Shakespeare 2003, 18.)

This evaluation does not do justice to how intelligently Shakespeare engages with Brooke and other predecessors in this soliloquy. To understand the passage's Senecanism we must appreciate the originality of Shakespeare's additions, but also how he looks past Brooke to Boaistuau and even Bandello. It is thus worth considering the historical development of this episode from Bandello to Shakespeare.

In Bandello's novella, Giulietta suffers a sleepless night before her marriage to Paris, revolving various thoughts in her mind. To-

ward dawn, she pictures Tybalt in her imagination, bloody and pierced through the throat. Then, thinking about being buried in her family's tomb and surrounded by dead bodies, her own body goes cold, her hair curls, and she trembles like a leaf in the wind. An icy sweat covers her limbs, "parendole tratto tratto ch'ella da quei morti fosse in mille pezzi smembrata" (Bandello 1560, fol. CC4r; it seeming to her at every moment that she was dismembered into a thousand bits by the dead)[6]. Giulietta then breaks into speech, and in a series of frantic questions doubts the wisdom of drinking the potion. What if she awakes before the friar and Romeo come? Will she be able to endure the stench of Tybalt's rotting body? If she cannot bear the sight of worms and serpents, how will she suffer them to touch her? At this point, she nearly empties the potion on the floor, but after raving (*farneticando*) with strange thoughts, at last, the sun rising and the thoughts driven out, she gulps down the potion and falls asleep (fol. CC4v).

In his French translation of Bandello, Boaistuau makes the dramatically effective decision to reorder the episode so that it begins with Iulliette's speech and climaxes with the imagined Thibault leading a crowd of dead and hostile kin. Lying on her bed, the young woman is encompassed with thoughts, along with "vne apprehension de mort si grande" that she does not know how to make up her mind (Boaistuau 1559, fol. i8r; an apprehension of death so great). Plaintively, she asks whether she is not the most unfortunate and desperate creature ever born among women, for in this world she has had nothing but misfortune, misery, and mortal sadness. She worries that, should the potion be mistimed, she will be a laughing-stock of the people. Here it is as if Boaistuau is working through Bandello in reverse, for Iulliette expresses anxiety over snakes and other venomous beasts, then the stench of the bodies, and then the possibility of awaking before Romeo and friar Laurens arrive. In any case, he is building toward the fantasy about Thibault, which he elevates to the power of vision: "son imagination fut si forte, qui'il luy sembloit aduis qu'elle voyoit quelque spectre ou fantosme de son cousin Thibault, en la mesme sorte qu'elle l'auoit veu blessé, & sanglant" (fol. i8v; her imagination was so strong that it seemed to her that she saw a ghost

6 Translations are my own where not otherwise noted.

or phantom of her cousin Thibault, appearing just as she had seen him when wounded and bloody). Imagining herself buried alive next to lifeless bodies and bones naked of flesh, her own tender and delicate body shudders, her hair bristles, and a cold sweat penetrates her skin. It then seems to her that she is surrounded by "infinité de morts" (fol. k1r; an infinity of dead ones) who pull her on all sides and tear her to pieces. Feeling herself diminished and fearing lest she be too weak to go through with it, "comme furieuse & forcenée" she drinks the potion, crosses her arms upon her stomach, and loses consciousness (fol. k1r; as if raging and frantic).

The corresponding passage in Arthur Brooke's *Romeus and Iuliet* translates Boaistuau into English poulter's measure, but does not stray far from his sense or even his phrasing and vocabulary. For instance, "*nouueaux* pensers commencerent à *l'enuironner*, auec vne apprehension de mort si grande, qu'elle ne sçauoit en quoy se *resouldre*" (fol. i8r; new thoughts began to surround her, with an apprehension of death so great that she did not know what to decide on) becomes

> Where diuers *nouel* thoughts / arise within her hed,
> And she is so *inuironed* / about with deadly dred,
> That what before she had / *resolued* vndoutedly,
> That same she calleth into doute. (Brooke 1562, fol. J2r)

Brooke renders "craignant que, part trop grande debilité, elle ne peust *executer* son *entreprinse*" (fol. k1r; fearing lest, on account of too great weakness, she could not execute her enterprise) as "Dreading that weakenes might / or foolish cowardise / Hinder the *execution* of / the purposde *enterprise*" (fol. J3v)[7]. Brooke manages to fit in virtually everything Boaistuau says, expanding for either poetic ornamentation, or perhaps to fill out a line or complete a rhyme. In Brooke, Tybalt thus appears "out of the hollow vaulte", and is "A griesly thing to looke vpon". Juliet's sweat is "colde as mountaine yse" (fol. J3r). It is therefore all the more striking when Brooke stops short when translating Iulliette's fantasy of dismemberment. In Boaistuau, the "infinité de morts […] la tirailloient de tous costez, & la mettoient en pieces" (fol. k1r; infinity of dead ones dragged her on all sides and

7 Emphasis is mine.

tore her into pieces). Brooke softens the terror of this image by rendering it hypothetical: "A thousand bodies dead / haue compast her about, / And lest they will dismember her, / she greatly standes in dout" (fol. J3r). Contrast this with William Painter's 1567 translation of Boaistuau: "she thought that an hundred thousand deathes did stande about hir, haling hir on euery side, and plucking hir in pieces" (Painter 1567, fol. OO3v).

Though the Shakespearean soliloquy is clearly based on Brooke, it still contains original ideas; it relies far less on Brooke than Brooke himself does on Boaistuau. The first thing a reader familiar with Brooke would notice is that Juliet does not feel sorry for herself. She does not ask herself, like Brooke's Juliet, whether there is

> any one / beneth the heauens hye,
> So much vnfortunate as I, / so much past hope as I?
> What, am not I my selfe / of all that yet were borne,
> The depest drenched in dispayre, / and most in Fortunes skorne?
> For loe the world for me, / hath nothing els to finde,
> Beside mishap and wretchednes, / and anguish of the mynde (fol. J2r)

Though she feels "a faint cold fear" thrilling through her veins that "almost freezes up the heat of life" (IV.iii.15, 16), and momentarily considers calling back her nurse, Shakespeare's Juliet turns from this impulse with noble resolve: "My dismal scene I needs must act alone. / Come, vial" (19-20) – lines worthy of Cleopatra, or any number of tragic protagonists. In keeping with this stoic magnanimity, Juliet does not simply fret over the efficacy of the potion like her predecessors, but readies a knife for that very contingency. After another original element, her fear that perhaps the Friar means to murder her (to which I will return), Juliet poses the traditional question about the possibility of waking early and imagines the various dangers and terrors she would have to face alone. While Shakespeare continues to rework Brooke, he also draws upon other predecessors. The phrase "horrible conceit of death" (37) may owe something to William Painter's "conceipt of grieuous Death" (fol. OO3r) which translates the "apprehension de mort si grande" that Boaistuau's Iulliette feels while lying on her bed. More importantly, with the lines "where, as they say, / At some hours in the night spirits resort" (IV.iii.43-44) Shakespeare seems to return to the episode's origins in Bandello:

"Non ho io sentito dir tante e tante uolte, che molte spauenteuoli cose di notte sono auuenute, non che dentro à sepolture, ma nelle chiese ò cimiteri?" (fol. CC4v; Have I not heard it said time and again that many frightful things have happened, not only in graves, but in churches or cemeteries?). Though it leaves the "spauenteuoli cose" unspecified, churches and graveyards naturally suggest spirits, and the reference to a popular tradition about terrors of the night places Bandello's passage in the same class as Tamora's speech about the detested vale in *Titus* II.ii and its Senecan source in *Thyestes*.

Given that Shakespeare here intensifies the passage's Senecanism by underscoring the supernatural element, replacing the usual snakes with spirits, it is curious that the speech builds toward a vision of Tybalt's ghost alone, and dispenses with the crowd of dead kinsmen. At first it would seem that Shakespeare takes his cue from Brooke in softening the episode's horror. But in fact he has exchanged the violent crowd of ghosts for something no less grotesque and perhaps still more frightening. For his Juliet experiences a dark fantasy of dismemberment every bit as vivid as Boaistuau's Iulliette, but in this version, rather than suffer a violent end at other hands as innocent victim, she herself does the dismembering:

> O, if I wake, shall I not be distraught,
> Environed 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 desperate brains? (IV.iii.49-54)

In this waking nightmare, she commits the monstrosity of desecrating her kinsmen's remains, and if a dead body sheds her blood, it is because she wields the bone. The speech still climaxes with the menacing ghost of Tybalt, but he now comes not for her but Romeo. This latter change, seemingly minor, follows from how Shakespeare has altered the entire spirit of the episode. Unlike her predecessors, Shakespeare's Juliet does not begin by sinking beneath a sense of her own misfortune. And although the play (unlike Brooke's poem) absolves her of all culpability – *were* she to go mad from fear she would be no less a victim than if she were dismembered by reanimated bodies – her soliloquy bespeaks at once a troubled conscience and a

powerful sense of agency. Her nightmare of what may happen in the tomb is the dismal scene she must act alone because she, no longer a child who cries out for her nurse, has come of age, and now must make her own decisions and face whatever follows, hence the knife[8]. And if her decision to violate the Capulet family honor by marrying a Montague not only results in a dead cousin but strangely manifests itself as sacrilege against ancestral bodies, then that is her tragedy, and she must play her part.

Ancient Sources: Senecan Drama

With its vision of undead and bloodthirsty Capulets, the episode as imagined by Shakespeare's modern sources is of course latently Senecan. I have mentioned how Bandello's *spauenteuoli cose* specifically resemble Tamora's Thyestean description of what happens in the detested vale at night. I now wish to demonstrate how Shakespeare expands upon this Senecanism by drawing upon specific moments of Senecan drama. The first two of these moments happen to resonate with traditional elements of the episode, and the third inspires his major departure from that tradition, namely his depiction of Juliet's imagined madness.

In Boaistuau Iulliette worries about drinking a potion whose virtue she does not know ("duquel ie ne sçay la vertu"), for should it last too long or too short, it may lead to dishonor: "Mais que sçay-ie (disoit elle) si l'operation de ceste pouldre se fera point plustost ou plustard qu'il n'est de besoing, & que ma faulte estant descouuerte, ie demeure la fable du peuple" (Boaistuau 1559, fol. i8r-v). As Painter translates, "but what know I (sayd she) whether the operation of this pouder will be to soone or to late, or not correspondent to the due time, and that my faulte being discouered, I shall remayne a iesting stocke and fable to the people?" (fol. Oo03r-v). Strangely, Shakespeare reworks the

8 "Juliet […] finds herself faced with the choice between a father and a lover […]. This election of identity is forced upon her by circumstance, but there is no doubt of her resolution […]. Manifestly Juliet is neither hardhearted nor of an unloving disposition, yet she prefers the death of both her parents to the banishment of her lover" (Garber 1981, 39). Referring to IV.iii, Garber writes, "Juliet's resolve to conquer these fears marks a turning point in her growth to personal maturity; from this point she will no leading need" (220).

young woman's concern that taking the potion might dishonor her with a momentary suspicion that Friar Lawrence may have given her the potion to avoid his own dishonor by killing her:

> What if it be a poison which the Friar
> Subtly hath ministered to have me dead,
> Lest in this marriage he should be dishonoured,
> Because he married me before to Romeo? (IV.iii.24-27)

This suspicion is easily put aside as unworthy of her ghostly father: "I fear it is, and yet methinks it should not, / For he hath still been tried a holy man" (28-29). This somewhat paranoid fear that her confessor has planned her murder is perhaps somewhat less reasonable than her other fears – that she will wake too early, that she will suffocate, that she will go mad with terror – and would seem better suited to Brooke's poem, with its anti-Catholic prejudice.

But this fear of a poisoned potion nonetheless makes sense, for Shakespeare is rendering this traditional narrative as tragic drama, and as Juliet utters this question a Senecan memory surfaces. Shakespeare reorders the episode so that it begins with Juliet experiencing the same physiological sensations of fear her predecessors do: "I have a faint cold fear thrills through my veins, / That almost freezes up the heat of life" (15-16). By locating this just before Juliet's fear that the potion is poisoned, Shakespeare places Juliet for a brief moment in the role of Deïanira in Seneca's *Hercules Oetaeus*. Mad with grief that her husband Hercules has taken a mistress, Deïanira resorts to the blood of Nessus, which the dying centaur offered to her as a love potion ("virus" 536) should she ever need to win back her husband. After sending a robe smeared with the blood to Hercules, Deïanira describes her sudden fear that Nessus' gift may have been treacherous:

> Vagus per artus errat excussos tremor,
> erectus horret crinis, impulsis adhuc
> stat terror animis et cor attonitum salit
> pavidumque trepidis palpitat venis iecur.
> […]
> Ut missa palla est tabe Nessea inlita
> thalamisque demens intuli gressum meis,
> nescioquid animus timuit et fraudem astruit? (*Hercules Oetaeus*, 706-09, 715-18)

> (Shudders run here and there through my shaking limbs, my hair bristles up on end, terror still lodges in my stricken spirit, my heart beats hard in shock, and my liver pulses in fear, its veins trembling. […] After I had sent off the robe smeared with Nessus' gore, as I, raving, walked into my bedchamber, my mind formed a sort of fear, contrived a trick.)[9]

Deïanira then tells how she tested the blood by exposing it to sunlight, whereupon it burst into flame, poisoned as it was by the envenomed tip of Hercules' arrow. But the discovery comes too late, for presently the message arrives that Hercules is violently convulsing with pain; a spectacular self-immolation to release himself from life becomes his final labor. Poison and suicide will be the end of Juliet's husband too, and it is the friar who contrives the deception (Juliet's simulated death) that leads to it. That deception is a kind of shirt of Nessus: Juliet was promised it would reunite her with her husband, but in the event she awakes too late to spare him the pain he can only defeat through suicide. That tragic mistiming is perhaps the most classical, if not specifically Senecan, element of the lovers' drama. Cruelly, what Juliet fears most – awaking early – is precisely what would have saved Romeo's life and her own. The extraordinary potion, in fact, is all too trustworthy; less trustworthy was what she took for granted as the ordinary intercourse of daily life: that letters would be sent, health would hold, people would arrive at the appointed time. It is thus that even a holy friar may become an unwitting Nessus, deceiving and self-deceived: because human plans are fragile enough that, for all Juliet's nightmarish anticipations of the tragic worst, she never saw it coming.

Though the correspondence between Juliet and Deïanira plays out in interesting ways, the point of evoking Deïanira's fear of treachery in Juliet's IV.iii soliloquy is to create an atmosphere of Senecan fear. Also contributing to this atmosphere is the idea of being buried alive. Though the plot device of the faked death is thoroughly Shakespearean, the fact that Juliet is laid in a tomb, with tragic consequences, resonates particularly with Seneca's *Troades*. The play opens in

9 Here I combine the Loeb translation (Seneca 2018) with Davis Konstan's (Seneca 2017) to better render the sixteenth-century reading of the text; a seventeenth-century edition glosses "astruit" as "asserit me deceptam esse posse" (Seneca 1665, fol. N10r; asserts that I could be deceived).

the immediate aftermath of the fall of Troy, when the Greeks learn they must once again sacrifice before they sail: the ghost of Achilles has demanded the Trojan princess Polyxena for his bride, and the seer Calchas has declared they must kill Astyanax too, lest the boy grow up to avenge his father and his city with another war. When Hector's shade warns Andromache she must find a place to hide their son, she decides to shut him in his father's tomb. She shudders at the thought much like Juliet: "sudor per artus frigidus totos cadit: / omen tremesco misera feralis" (487-88; A cold sweat runs down my body: I tremble wretchedly at the omen represented by the place of death). Advised by an old compatriot to tell the Greeks her son died in the city's fall, Andromache swears to Ulysses that "luce caruit; inter extinctos iacet / datusque tumulo debita exanimis tulit" (603-04; he [has] lost the light; he lies among the dead, and entrusted to the tomb he has received the due of those departed). Juliet has had her own premonitions about places of death. Her grotesque nightmare about lying among the dead came to her even before the friar proposed his plan:

> O bid me leap, rather than marry Paris,
> From off the battlements of any tower,
> […].
> Or hide me nightly in a charnel-house,
> O'ercovered quite with dead men's rattling bones,
> With reeky shanks and yellow chapless skulls;
> Or bid me go into a new-made grave,
> And hide me with a dead man in his shroud,
> Things that, to hear them told, have made me tremble,
> And I will do it without fear or doubt,
> To live an unstained wife to my sweet love. (*Romeo and Juliet*, IV.i.77-78, 81-88)

Leaping off the battlements is precisely how Astyanax will die in Seneca's *Troades*, as opposed to being cast down, as in other versions of the legend: "sponte desiluit sua / in media Priami regna" (1102-03; he leaped down of his own accord, into the midst of Priam's kingdom). And when Juliet returns to these dark thoughts in IV.iii, her vision of "dash[ing] out my desperate brains" likewise glances back at this Senecan moment. As translated by Jasper Heywood in 1559, "The head was shattered with brains dashed from within" (Seneca 1966). The subtlety of these allusions suggests that their Senecanism is less

about paying tribute than channeling a particular kind of dread, of which Seneca was the undisputed master. Seneca's philosophy shows him thinking about what actually scares people: in his discussion of earthquakes in *Natural Questions*, he identifies being buried alive as a widely shared and particularly intense fear:

> There is no shortage of people who are more afraid of this manner of death, in which they fall into the abyss with their homes and are carried off alive from the ranks of the living; as though not every kind of death reached the same destination […]
> (Seneca 2010, 88)

The Senecan aspects of Juliet's soliloquy that I have considered thus far could have been inspired by the vaguely Senecan atmosphere already present in Shakespeare's modern sources. I now wish to return to the passage's most original element, where Juliet imagines desecrating the dead, and to suggest that one reason Shakespeare here diverges so dramatically from his modern sources is to directly engage with the *Hercules Furens*, a *locus classicus* for Senecan madness. As we have seen, Bandello, Boaistuau, and Brooke all depict their Juliets in a state of frenzy before she drinks the potion; it is only Shakespeare's Juliet who imagines going mad for fear in the tomb, evoking an atmosphere much like the one Tamora does in her fiction about the vale. We also have seen how the grotesque images of her fantasized madness result from a strange reversal, a perverse dismemberment, of the traditional source material, so that the dead tearing Juliet apart becomes Juliet tearing apart the dead. There is a small detail that discloses the Senecan origin and superimposes a Senecan persona upon Juliet's mental image of herself. It is the way Juliet speaks about her weapon: "And, in this rage, with some great kinsman's bone, / *As with a club*, dash out my desperate brains" (IV.iii.53-54; emphasis mine).

Hercules Furens depicts the tragic events following Hercules' return from the underworld. Suddenly struck mad by Juno, he cruelly slaughters his family moments after their joyful reunion. In his delirium, he sees his children as the sons of his enemy and his wife Megara as Juno; after shooting several sons with arrows he dashes one against the wall: "illi caput / sonat, cerebro tecta dispersa madent" (1006-07; his head smashes, the walls are wet, spattered with his brain), and then, after killing the small boy she was sheltering, brings his club

down on his wife's head:

> in coniugem nunc clava libratur gravis:
> perfregit ossa, corpori trunco caput
> abest nec usquam est. (*Hercules Furens*, 1024-26)
>
> (Against his wife now his heavy club is leveled; it smashed her bones, her head is gone from her truncated body, totally destroyed.)

After his madness runs its course, Hercules collapses in exhaustion and sleeps. To his horror, he awakes among the corpses of his family:

> unde prostrata domo
> video cruenta corpora? an nondum exuit
> simulacra mens inferna? post reditus quoque
> oberrat oculos turba feralis meos?
> pudet fateri: paveo; nescioquod mihi,
> nescioquod animus grande praesagit malum. (*Hercules Furens*, 1143-48)
>
> (why do I see bloodstained bodies in a ruined house? Has my mind not yet cast off images from the underworld? Even after my return does a throng of the dead wander before my eyes? I confess with shame that I feel afraid. There is some ill, some great ill, that my mind forebodes.)

Hercules awakes to a place of death not unlike Agamemnon's grove haunted by *ferales dei* and *vetus turba* (668, 671; gods of death, ancient crowd), and fears an omen like that which troubles Andromache. By shedding the blood of his family Hercules has created the same kind of unhallowed ground on which Agamemnon butchers his kin and that presages the brutal end of Astyanax. Juliet's soliloquy in IV.iii conjures up such a Senecan place and the dread it inspires, something shared by all three Senecan dramas alike, but it summons the specter of Hercules with particular force. It is true that the bodies she violently plucks and breaks apart are already dead. Juliet nevertheless commits a sacrilege upon the bodies of her family, and not just the dusty bones of her ancestors. Shakespeare's version is original in how largely Tybalt figures in the episode, naming him three times, and this is probably the reason why Shakespeare has omitted the crowd of the other dead. Though Juliet envisions Tybalt coming for Romeo, this occurs only

after she pictures herself violently plucking the "festering" and "mangled Tybalt from his shroud" (43, 52) as if she has awakened and enraged his ghost by disturbing its rest. Although she tells the Nurse that Romeo's banishment is the worse word that she would forget, but that "it presses to my memory / Like damned guilty deeds to sinners' minds" (III.ii.110-11), it seems that it is Tybalt who haunts the darker places of her consciousness, and it is telling that *this* is the metaphor that comes to her just before she wishes her parents dead.

When Shakespeare writes *Macbeth* ten years later, he will return to the *Hercules Furens* to find a language for the poetry of guilt[10]. Juliet of course is nothing like the Macbeths, even in her darkest fantasy. But the point of adding a fit of Herculean rage to that fantasy, I suggest, is that the kind of dread it evokes is one that comprises guilt as well as fear. Juliet imagines herself, like Hercules, awaking next to the dead bodies of her family, and then tearing them apart in a blind frenzy, because she fears that she too is a tragic protagonist who must awake, in a sudden anagnorisis, to the reality of her monstrous deeds, to a realization that she has violated her family's sacred honor and is somehow to blame for Tybalt's death. "My dismal scene I needs must act alone". It is for this reason that her final victim is indeed one of flesh and blood, as she dashes out her desperate brains with a great kinsman's bone – there is no better symbol for the ancient, ossified feud – in an act heavily reminiscent of Hercules cudgeling his wife with his club[11].

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10 "quis Tanais aut quis Nilus aut quis Persica / violentus unda Tigris aut Rhenus ferox / Tagusve Hibera turbidus gaza fluens / abluere dextram poterit?" (*Hercules Furens*, 1323-26; What Tanais or what Nile or what Persian Tigris with its violent waters or fierce Rhine or Tagus, turbid with Spanish treasure, can wash my right hand clean?) See Cunliffe 1893, 82, 84; Burrow 2013, 189.

11 Coppélia Kahn has made a similar point: "This waking dream, like all the dreams recounted in the play, holds psychological truth; it bespeaks Juliet's knowledge that in loving Romeo she has broken a taboo as forceful as that against harming the sacred relics of her ancestors, and her fear of being punished for the offense by the ancestors themselves – with their very bones" (Kahn 1977-1978, 18). See also Paul A. Kottman: "By making a mockery of her family's care for her dead body […] she will not be able to see her dead family members as anything other than mere corpses […]. Therefore, the cost of her freedom is high indeed. Not only must she outlive the claims of her living family members

Juliet's reference to acting a dismal scene suggests not only that Shakespeare is channeling the dread of a Senecan scene but that Juliet herself fears that she has become a Senecan persona and will experience a fitting tragic end. Just as the young Lucius points to Ovid's Hecuba, and Lavinia points to Philomela, so Juliet fears that, like Deïanira, she has been betrayed; like Astyanax she will be buried alive; like Hercules she will violate, and already has violated, kinships' sacred bonds. Whether or not the Capulet tomb is visited by spirits at night, as people say, what is certain is that Juliet's mind swarms with the revenants of Senecan personae.

A Senecan Climax

The spirit of Hercules continues to stalk this play, as he does other Shakespeare plays, especially *Antony and Cleopatra*, as when Antony exclaims, "The shirt of Nessus is upon me" and prays to his ancestor to teach him his rage (IV.xii.43-44), or when mysterious music indicates the god is leaving him (IV.iii.21). That spirit descends upon Romeo as he performs Herculean furor to drive away his servant Balthasar:

> By heaven, I will tear thee joint by joint
> And strew this hungry churchyard with thy limbs.
> The time and my intents are savage-wild,
> More fierce and more inexorable far
> Than empty tigers or the roaring sea. (*Romeo and Juliet*, V.iii.35-39)

a speech certainly delivered in "Ercles' vein" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I.ii.36), and does so again, perhaps more authentically, when Romeo says to Paris, "Put not another sin upon my head / By urging me to fury" and "hereafter say / A madman's mercy bid thee run away (*Romeo and Juliet*, V.iii.63, 67)[12].

on her life, she must forsake the community of the living and the dead that binds her to others as human" (Kottman 2012, 32).

12 Robin Wells also observes that Romeo here speaks in "Ercles' vein," but argues that he continues in it even in his final speech, and that Shakespeare sets the "kitsch" of Romeo's "heroic pretensions" against the more compelling dark comedy of Juliet's final words (Wells 2005, 125-27).

The dramatic function of the lovers' Herculean moments is to raise the question of what in fact will happen in the tomb: will Romeo lose himself to rage when he sees what he takes to be Juliet's corpse? Will Juliet go mad, as she has feared, when she awakes not only next to Tybalt but the freshly dead body of her husband? If the lovers assume the role of Senecan personae in thought and deed, what sort of tragic end will they meet?

The lovers' final speeches capture an encounter with mortality that is utterly different from what Juliet feared. What Romeo says about the tomb seems directly to address and refute the nightmare of Juliet's IV.iii soliloquy. One must not call it a grave:

> A grave – O, no, a lantern, slaughtered youth,
> For here lies Juliet, and her beauty makes
> This vault a feasting presence full of light.
> […]
> How oft, when men are at the point of death,
> Have they been merry, which their keepers call
> A lightening before death. O, how may I
> Call this a lightening? O my love, my wife,
> Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath
> Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty.
> Thou art not conquered. (*Romeo and Juliet*, V.iii.84-86, 88-94)

It may be tempting to say that, for its resolution, this romantic tragedy decisively turns away from classical tragedy, that the Senecan ghosts have finally been exorcised. Tybalt is there in his "bloody sheet" (97), but lies at rest as Romeo begs his forgiveness. And for all the macabre language about death, poison, and worms, horror has been replaced by the lyricism of poetry and the wit of gallows' humor. The lovers are left to face the bleak reality of their situation, but with their sanity intact.

Nevertheless, although Seneca's dread does not hound the lovers to their graves, his tragedies contain more than one kind of climax, as Jonathan Bate has argued:

> Seneca provided Shakespeare with three different models for the climax of a tragedy. There was the *Hercules Furens* model: the explosion of anger that is replicated in the fury of Mark Antony. There was the Stoic resignation, the serenity of acceptance, to which Hamlet comes. But there was also a

> darker philosophy, a welcoming of death, seen especially in *Macbeth*. (Bate 2019, 230.)

I would suggest that Seneca offered Shakespeare a fourth kind of tragic climax, one exemplified by the Trojan princess Polyxena at the end of the *Troades*. Demanded by the ghost of Achilles for his underworldly bride, Polyxena is led by marriage torches to be sacrificed upon the hero's burial mound, tomb and wedding converging just as they do in *Romeo and Juliet*. Achilles as ghostly groom likewise offers precedent for Romeo's idea of amorous Death, "the lean abhorred monster [who] keeps / Thee here in dark to be his paramour" (V.iii.104-05). But Juliet resembles Polyxena most in her radiance before death:

> Ipsa deiectos gerit
> vultus pudore, sed tamen fulgent genae
> magisque solito splendet extremus decor,
> ut esse Phoebi dulcius lumen solet
> iamiam cadentis, astra cum repetunt vices
> premiturque dubius nocte vicina dies. (*Troades*, 1137-1142)
>
> (She herself lowered her gaze in modesty, but her eyes were radiant nonetheless, and her beauty shone forth more than usual at its ending, as Phoebus' light is always lovelier at the moment of setting, when the stars take up the cycle and failing daylight is threatened by night's closeness.)

Juliet's "beauty makes / This vault a feasting presence full of light", and insofar as she, unbeknownst to Romeo, is at this moment nearing the point of death, his proverb about the "lightening before death" applies to her as well, for the phrase refers to luminosity as well as lightness of weight[13]. Polyxena-like, her life only gathers intensity as the darkness approaches, like the setting light of day. If death is the West, Juliet is the sun.

While Juliet and Polyxena – who both die by knife-wound – face

13 See the phrase "lightening before death" in OED, "lightening, n.1": "The phrase could perhaps alternatively be interpreted as showing *lightening* n.2 and may sometimes have been understood as such. However, parallel use of 'a glimmering before death' in Fletcher's Spanish Curate iv. v. strongly suggests that the phrase originally had the sense of 'brightness' rather than 'lack of heaviness' and so belongs here".

their death bravely, they share more than Stoic resignation and hence enact a different kind of tragic climax, one defined by its character of transcendence. Arguably it may be found at the end of *Hercules Oeateus* as well, when Hercules, physically incandescent as he burns alive in his funeral pyre, lifts his eyes to the stars as he seeks apotheosis: "quis illum credat ad flammas rapi? / vultus petentis astra, non ignes erant (1644-45; Yet who would have believed him hurried toward the flames? His expression was that of one heading to the stars, not the fire)[14]. Indifferent to pain, he comforts his friends, who are smitten with wonder; "stupet omne vulgus" (The whole crowd stood in amazement) – the very words used to capture the atmosphere at Polyxena's death: "stupet omne vulgus […] movet animus omnes fortis et leto obvius […] miserentur ac mirantur" (1143, 1146, 1148; The whole crowd was awestruck […] all were moved by the braveness of her spirits, facing death head-on; they felt pity and marveled). It is such moments in Senecan drama that remind us that the tragedian is also a philosopher:

> Weak and fluid ourselves, we stand in the midst of illusions. So let us direct our minds toward things that are eternal. Let us fly upward and gaze in wonder at the forms of all things [Miremur in sublimi volitantes rerum omnium formas], and at God, who dwells among them […]. Let us spurn all those things which are so far from being valuable that it is in doubt whether they exist at all. (Seneca 2015, 170)[15]

Hercules and Polyxena thus become dramatic exemplars of a particular orientation to reality, of a mind that can penetrate the veil of contingency to marvel at the eternal and sublime. By dramatizing this idea, Seneca's personae demonstrate what happens when such a mind is finally ready to shuffle off its mortal coil. It reflects and radiates, such that an atmosphere of dread is transfigured into one of awe[16].

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14 See Robert Miola on the absence of such a climax in *Othello*: "Nor does Othello die like the Hercules of *Hercules Oetaeus*, transfigured into a better existence. Instead, Shakespeare denied Othello all possibility of apotheosis" (Miola 1992, 141).

15 Latin text from Seneca 2018. On Seneca's reception of Plato in this letter, and in this passage in particular, see Long 2017, 218-24.

16 Although in the Renaissance some believed Seneca the philosopher and Seneca the tragedian to be two separate people (Burrow 2013, 166), critics of Shake-

Such a climax will be given to Cleopatra ("I have / Immortal longings in me"; *Antony and Cleopatra*, V.ii.278-79). Whether or not the Veronese lovers expect their love to survive death[17], their final moments are exalted by a sense of triumph:

> Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath
> Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty.
> Thou art not conquered. Beauty's ensign yet
> Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks,
> And death's pale flag is not advanced there. (*Romeo and Juliet*, V.iii.92-96)

lines that read as semi-religious (cf. "death hath no more dominion ouer him"; "Death is swallowed vp into victorie" Romans 6:9, 1 Corinthians 15:54, Geneva Bible [Anon. 1560]). Seneca gives us reason to take seriously such intimations: certainly the Stoic's contempt for the material world in view of the eternal offers a more historically plausible model for the lovers' attitude toward death than the Wagnerian *Liebestod* (let alone the Lacanian death wish) that has figured so largely in interpretations of the play since Denis de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World*[18].

Of course, precisely because Romeo and Juliet do not love the "lean abhorred monster", and would prefer life together[19], the lovers'

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speare have found reading his reception of Senecan tragedy in view of Seneca's philosophy instructive. See, for instance, Colin Burrow's *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity* (Burrow 2013, 177-86, 195-201).

17 Ramie Targoff argues that the lovers do not, and that Shakespeare denies such a consolation to the audience (Targoff 2012, 17-38).

18 *Liebestod*: "the ancient idea that death is in fact the true object of erotic desire" (Grady 2009, 202). See de Rougemont 1940, 164-66; Dollimore 2011, 108-13; Kristeva 1992, 296-315. See also, more recently, Kiernan Ryan: "The entire *Liebestod* in which the tragedy culminates is erotically charged to the point where the catastrophe can be construed as an apotheosis, a moment of sublime consummation […]. But the familiarity of that romantic paradox […] shouldn't blind us to the craving for oblivion at its heart" (Ryan 2021, 52).

19 As Robin Wells writes in his argument against de Rougemont, Kristeva, and Dollimore, "while it's true that the couple are certainly preoccupied with death, they seek it only as a desperate alternative to the prospect of life without their marriage partner […]. Romeo […] talks of death as a 'love-devouring' annihilator of all that matters to him […] while Juliet sees it as a hopeless last resort" (Wells 2005, 113-14). See also Hugh Grady's argument against this interpretive tradition: "*Romeo and Juliet* celebrates and cherishes desire as an essential life-force [and] mourns its

suicides remain wholly tragic, and death certainly seems to have the upper hand in the dateless bargain Romeo strikes with him. Nevertheless, more than their Stoic contempt for death, what makes the lovers' end Senecan is that horror has given way to wonder[20]. Juliet fears that she will meet the cruel fate of Senecan personae, that she will go mad like Hercules or have her brains dashed out like Astyanax. Her premonitions that her "dismal scene" belongs to Senecan tragedy are accurate, but only insofar as there is more to Senecan tragedy than the horrifically grotesque. She does resemble Hercules in her death, but a Hercules restored to sanity; her death is Trojan, but only because she overthrows the darkness of the tomb with her light, and defies death with a final surge of vitality: not just the crimson warmth Romeo sees as she sleeps, but the flash of her wit ("O churl, drunk all, and left no friendly drop / To help me after?" [163-64]) – her willfulness and resolve, spoken in frank monosyllables: "Go, get thee hence, for I will not away / […]. This is thy sheath; there rust and let me die" (160, 170).

Thus it is that *Romeo and Juliet* overpowers Senecan dread with Senecan wonder, reading the word against the word. Perhaps this is to say that, at brief but decisive moments, *Romeo and Juliet*'s Senecanism exceeds even that of *Titus*, which only captures a fragmented half of the philosopher-tragedian's vision of the world. And perhaps this is also to revise G. K. Hunter's thesis that the two plays represent the extreme poles between which the future tragedies will fall, and to say that *Romeo and Juliet* itself embraces that tragic range, or at least adumbrates it, offering a vision of things to come.

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loss in premature death […]. *Romeo and Juliet* thus represents the defeat of death by desire crystallized in art at the same time that it recognizes and mourns both the cruelty of chance and the inevitability of death" (Grady 2009, 203-04).

20 For a richly beautiful reading of the lovers' deaths that focuses less on transcendence than the immanent presence of bodies and words, see Hester Lees-Jeffries: "At the very last there is still a sense of things fitting together beautifully, rightly, so that no other way would be imaginable: thoughts and voices; hands, kisses, bodies; a jointly crafted sonnet, couplet after couplet and shared verse lines; conceits of darkness and light tossed back and forth unerringly, joyfully. That is how Romeo and Juliet die, in each other's arms, together and *here*, and echoing each other's final words even in death" (Lees-Jeffries 2023, 253).

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