

On Desire

My first apprehension of desire took the form of balcony scenes, casement windows, thresholds...

*Over the cobbles he clattered and clashed in the dark inn-yard,
He tapped with his whip on the shutters, but all was locked and barred;
He whistled a tune to the window, and who should be waiting there
But the landlord's black-eyed daughter,
Bess, the landlord's daughter,
Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her long black hair.*

*"One kiss, my bonny sweetheart, I'm after a prize tonight,
But I shall be back with the yellow gold before the morning light..."*

of darkness...

*...Yet, if they press me sharply, and harry me through the day,
Then look for me by moonlight,
Watch for me by moonlight,
I'll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way."*

of unreachability...

He rose upright in the stirrups; he scarce could reach her hand,...

of consummation indistinguishable from air ...

*...But she loosened her hair o'er the casement. His face burnt like a brand
As the black cascade of perfume came tumbling over his breast;
And he kissed its waves in the moonlight,
(Oh, sweet black waves in the moonlight!)
Then he tugged at his rein in the moonlight, and galloped away to the West.*

and, then, of course, of death in the form of King George's men.

*Blood-red were his spurs in the golden noon; wine-red was his velvet coat,
When they shot him down on the highway,
Down like a dog on the highway,
And he lay in his blood on the highway, with a bunch of lace at his throat.*

I heard these words perhaps first at age one—the rhythms implanting before meaning--and at 3, and at 7, on a near nightly basis, as my handsome father recited the fateful lines from faultless memory to lull me and my brothers to sleep in a heap, our breathing paced to the cadences of scarlet-tinged sensuality and violence, the images giving an ineradicable visual life to desire.

When in 5th grade, on the playground, slightly chubby Artie Becker stole a kiss from me—who longed only to be Bess—I knew the scene didn't answer the bill.

A bit later I learned that Shakespeare had beaten Alfred Noyes to the punch, measurably, in the matter of balcony scenes. At least, thanks to Noyes, when I first read *Romeo and Juliet*, still at a pubescent age, I already knew about the darkness, the walled garden, the clamoring upwards, the desperation, and the erotic reaching across a gap of space.

De sidere, from the stars in Latin. And, indeed stars are littered throughout *Romeo and Juliet*, crossing lovers, presaging consequences, illuminating darkness, catalyzing the impossible, fatal reaching.

Shakespeare was not entirely able to eradicate from my consciousness either Bess, *the landlord's red-lipped daughter* or her gorgeously attired criminal in his high thigh boots, but he did introduce into my life a new intensity of feeling about chasms, unreachability, and fatal pairings. Though I had gleaned from Noyes that sex and death might be linked, I had no idea that they could be fundamental correlates in which the Renaissance trope for orgasm as a kind of dying could move from obvious joke to irredeemable loss. Every sexual pun—of which there seem to be thousands in *Romeo and Juliet*—is also a foreboding, a double-purposed rapier bringing “*some vile forfeit of untimely death*”, played out through a closed rhyme scheme based on womb and tomb.

Though Romeo speaks in the elegant diction of Renaissance courtship, Juliet is, from the start, a very Mercutio of erotic punning, a precursor of the bawdy, even more brilliant queen to come in a later play. Following her marriage, she longs for carnal not metaphoric consummation: “*Come, civil night,...And learn me how to lose a winning match,/Play'd for a pair of stainless maidenhoods...O, I have bought the mansion of a love,/But not yet possess'd it, and though I am sold, /Not yet enjoy'd.*” The actual precipitate consummation takes place off stage, allowing us no protection from the careening progression towards the colder, marble marriage bed. Palpably hormonal, the drama yet never allows desire and death to play solo melodies--as if the universe might go hay-wire if desire were to blossom, or even triumph in the moment. Brimming, overflowing youth provides no cover for “*ashes, ashes, we all fall down.*”

But this turned out not to be the final story. Desire was itself unruly, apparently unchastened by death, always to be dealt with.

Shakespeare's greatest balcony scene, the moment when Cleopatra hauls the dying Antony into her monument, came late in his career, and for me is still the most erotic and perhaps also the most fully romantic scene in literature. The rising, in this case of the nearly dead weight of Antony, transforms metaphor into metaphysics, the image of the double-purposed sword, falling before the thrusting power of Cleopatra's powers of imagination and transformation—*"her infinite variety"*. Here desire has its day, it's very separate and triumphant solo performance, in spite of Rome, in spite of defeat in battle, in the very maw of death. *"But come, come Anthony...we must draw thee up...Here is sport indeed! O, come, come, come.."*

Death, of course, arrives on cue. But following Cleopatra's command, it comes in the form of the *"pretty worm of Nilus"*, a *"lover's pinch"*, or as a baby sucking its nurse asleep, a consummation of *"immortal longings"*, by which *"the knot intricate"*, is exultantly loosened. Brilliantly, Shakespeare gives the most beautiful lines of the play to Caesar, triumphant in his territorial victory, but bereft of the greatest prize. Looking down at the dead queen, who has eluded him so utterly, he pays open tribute to desire, marveling at Cleopatra's unquenchable power as she lies in a marriage bed of her own making: *"As if she would catch another Antony in her strong toil of grace."* We are in the territory of dark, divine jokes that delight the gods.

Desire and death—even with the help of Shakespeare--there's no according with them. As to the first, I can't help noticing that the more death prunes, the more desire thrives, perversely and particularly, in the absence of an object on which it might feed and flourish.