Mortal Love: 
Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet and the Practice of Joint Burial

The most famous tomb in all of Shakespeare’s works belongs to his lovers from Verona, Romeo and Juliet. Romeo and Juliet’s tomb is not, in fact, devoted to the young couple. It is an Italian family tomb, filled with the remains of the Capulets. Romeo and Juliet lie buried together inside the Capulet monument, but their names are not inscribed on its walls. The commemoration of Romeo and Juliet takes place elsewhere, in the golden statues erected by their fathers, which record their tragic love for all of Verona to see. Shakespeare does not supply an epitaph for the tomb, as his primary sources do. In the story’s most popular Italian version, Matteo Bandello’s 1554 novella, the tomb that holds the two lovers is inscribed with Giulietta’s dying words: “Grant me my dearest husband to ensue [follow] / So where he goeth I may go abide / With him, for this alone I seek and sue.” Shakespeare gives no epitaph, but the play makes clear what kind of epitaph it would have to be. It would not look forward to a reunion in heaven, nor would it ask for prayers for the lovers’ souls. Shakespeare’s epitaph for Romeo and Juliet, should it have been written, would simply petition for them to lie side by side in the earth.

Why Romeo and Juliet end up in a tomb is at the center of the story that Shakespeare inherited from his Italian, French, and English predecessors, who told this tale in multiple versions over the course of the sixteenth century. But how Romeo and Juliet understand the fate of their love is entirely Shakespeare’s invention. Here the playwright introduced a new conception of the relationship between Romeo and Juliet’s love and their mortality. In Shakespeare’s sources, the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet’s death was softened by the idea, articulated by the lovers themselves, that their souls would share some form of a meaningful afterlife. Shakespeare removed any such transcendent vision of posthumous love from his play. In doing so, he created his most potent expression of what it meant for love to be mortal.

Abstract This essay considers Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet in the context of early modern attitudes toward love after death. It argues that Shakespeare’s rejection of the idea that Romeo and Juliet would share a heavenly afterlife—an idea that runs throughout his sources for the play—helped him to shape a new mode of tragic power, one that depended upon insisting that love is mortal. Representations 120. Fall 2012 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 17–38. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp. DOI: 10.1525/rep.2012.120.1.17.
The idea that love was mortal lies at the heart of sixteenth-century English Protestant culture and represents one of its strongest breaks from the Italian and Catholic traditions it had inherited. Dante and Petrarch both passionately envisioned their future encounters in heaven with Beatrice and Laura, respectively, and Neoplatonic philosophers described in great detail the ladder of love that ascended from the earthly beloved to the celestial spheres, creating continuity between the two realms. When English poets began to grapple seriously with this Italian legacy in the early sixteenth century, they consistently refused the alluring idea that love might transcend the grave. This refusal came at least in part out of a religious disposition that rejected the idea of continuity between relations in this world and the next.

Scholars have noted that the Protestant elimination of purgatory and prohibition of prayers for the deceased altered the ways in which people conceived of the relations between the living and the dead. But what they have almost entirely overlooked is the extent to which Protestant theologians also strove to change people’s understanding of what awaited them and their loved ones in heaven. As we shall see, for John Calvin and his followers there was no possibility of spousal reunion after death; earthly attachments would be left behind in pursuit of loftier pleasures. What arose in post-Reformation England was a fundamental tension between this theological position—the idea that death would bring an absolute end to all erotic bonds—and the emotional yearning to remain connected to one’s husband or wife or lover beyond the mortal realm. It was out of this tension, I will argue, that Shakespeare constructed the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*, a play that at once registers the enormously high cost of denying posthumous love and derives its emotional and aesthetic power from this very denial.

I

The idea that marriage vows would come to an end with the death of one or the other spouse was not an innovation of Protestantism. Both Catholic and Protestant theologians maintained that marital bonds were strictly mortal and had no possibility of renewal after death. They based this conclusion on scriptural evidence, citing the account of Jesus’s reply to the Sadducees reported in the synoptic gospels. As Matthew relates it, the Sadducees, who did not believe in resurrection, asked Jesus what would become of a woman who had married seven brothers successively when they all met again in heaven. Whose wife, they taunted, would she be? Jesus’s reply—“For in the resurrection, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven” (Matthew 22:30)—became for many the definitive position on posthumous love in the Christian church.
Although the Bible did not specify the boundaries for marital union, Christian liturgies had always been clear about the limits of their jurisdiction. The Latin rite most commonly used in England before the Reformation, known as the Sarum Use, declared wedding vows to be binding “till death us depart”; even before the adoption of an English liturgy in the mid-sixteenth century this “plighting of troth” was conducted in the vernacular, to make certain that there could be no misunderstanding. The Protestant Book of Common Prayer, first published in 1549, made no substantial alterations to the Sarum matrimony service and kept the language of the plighting unchanged. According to the Book of Common Prayer, the minister instructs first the man, and then the woman, to say: “I take thee N. to my wedded wife [husband] to have and to hold from this day forth. . . . till death us depart, according to Gods holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth.”

The formula “till death us depart” was almost certainly intended to prohibit abandonment or divorce; it was consistent with Jesus’s response to the Pharisees’ question, as related in Matthew 19, as to whether it is “lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause,” to which Jesus replied, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matthew 19:6). But in the post-Reformation period, “till death us depart” took on a second meaning: it was used to reinforce the termination of marital vows after death. According to Calvin, we should expect no human fellowship in heaven: “To be in Paradise and live with God,” he exclaims, “is not to speak to each other, and to be heard by each other, but is only to enjoy God, to feel his good will, and rest in him.”

Calvin specifies that divine companionship is incompatible with the companionship of former spouses on earth. The scriptural text he uses to ground this argument is not Matthew 22:30 (“For in the resurrection, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven”), but a later verse from this gospel, “Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left” (24:40). The choice of Matthew 24:40 to argue against heavenly companionship between earthly loved ones was idiosyncratic: this verse does not in any way suggest that the “two” people in the field were a married couple, nor was there any basis in the centuries of biblical commentary that Calvin had inherited for understanding it in this manner. But Calvin saw in Matthew 24:40 a clear articulation of the imperative to separate partners at the moment of death, and he takes this opportunity to warn husbands and wives against any expectation of resuming their ties in the afterlife. “Husbands and wives will then be torn apart from one another,” he declares, employing the unambiguous Latin verb “diripio” (to tear to pieces), “lest the bonds that connected human beings to one another hinder the pious.” The reason for this shattering of human bonds is to ensure that men and women “run with cheerfulness” to their deaths, that they not hold back due to any
prior obligations or ties. Christ intended, Calvin concludes, “to cut off every occasion of delay, to enjoin every one to make haste, that those who [are] already prepared may not waste their time in waiting for their companions.”

The Church of England never officially adopted Calvin’s position: there were no ecclesiastical articles or injunctions issued on marital relations after death, nor did either the Book of Common Prayer or the Book of Homilies describe what would await deceased spouses (in the latter’s “Homily of the State of Matrimony,” obligations surrounding the spouse’s death or widowhood are not discussed). Versions of Calvin’s position surfaced regularly, however, in English sermons and treatises, where we encounter descriptions of heavenly company stripped of all prior earthly attachments. In the words of Edward Vaughan, author of *A Divine Discoverie of Death* (1612), in heaven we will exchange “the company of husband or wife for the company of Iesus Christe himself.” To the extent that human company is imagined in these contexts, it is always described in terms of biblical figures. As the Scottish minister Alexander Hume explains in his 1594 *Treatise of Felicitie of Life to Come*,

We shall haue for our familiar brethren and companions our first progenitor Adam, Noe, Lot, Abraham, Isaac & Iacob, and the twelue Patriarks, the sonnes of Iacob: Likewise wee shall see, by familiar, and contract friendship & brotherhood which never shall be dissolved, with Moses, Aaron, Iosua, and the just judges of Israel, with Samuell, Elias, and Elisha, Esay, Jeremie, Ezechiell, and Daniell, with David, Ezechias, and Iosias, with Iohn the Baptist, Peter, Paul, & Iohn, whome our Saviour loved: with whome wee shal dwell as brethren and Citizens of a Cittie.12

Our own families on this earth will be replaced with the likes of Adam and Noah, Peter and Paul. “We shall see them face to face,” Hume declares, “which none can behold, nor apprehend in this life, but by faith only.”

John Bunyan’s description of Christian’s reaction to the Evangelist in the opening pages of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* provides a vivid illustration of this theological message:

So I saw in my Dream, that the Man began to run; Now he had not run far from his own door, but his Wife and Children perceiving it, began to cry after him to return: but the Man put his fingers in his Ears, and ran on crying, Life, Life, Eternal Life.14

Far from regretting the separation from his wife and children, Christian shields his ears from their cries as he begins the journey that will ultimately lead to his salvation. When some pages later Christian is asked by the wavering Pliable “what company shall we have there,” he replies:

There we shall be with Seraphims, and Cherubins, Creatures that will daze your eyes to look on them: There also you shall meet with thousands, and ten thousands that have gone before us to that place; none of them are hurtful, but loving, and holy; every one walking in the sight of God; and standing in his presence with acceptance...
for ever: In a word, there we shall see the Elders with their Golden Crowns: There we shall see the Holy Virgins with their Golden Harps (13).

Christian’s vision of heaven is not stripped of human souls—there are “thousands, and ten thousands that have gone before us”—but the emphasis is not on the sweet human companionship that they will offer. Instead, Bunyan stresses the collective service they will give to God, forming the kind of heavenly choir warbling hymns and hallelujahs that John Milton’s fallen angels find so repugnant.

At the same time that we have plenty of examples within the English church of conformity with the hard-line Calvinist position, we also find voices of subtle, or not so subtle, resistance. Robert Bolton, a fierce Puritan churchman and author of several polemical works against papistry, affirmed in 1632 that one of our principal duties in marriage is to “hel[p] one another towards heaven, and that joyfull forethought of most certaine meeting together in the ever lasting mansions of glory, joy and blisse above.” Bolton later explains, in more or less explicit contradiction of Calvin, why the “glory, joy and blisse above” would not be adequate recompense without the companionship of our spouse. Since in heaven we shall “enjoy every good thing, and comfortable gift, which may any way increase and inlarge our joy and felicity” (145), it is not possible that we will be denied one of our central sources of happiness.

Bolton directs his reader to a letter written by Saint Augustine to a widow, Italica, who had applied to Augustine for comfort. Although on other occasions Augustine expressed his indifference as to the company of loved ones in heaven, emphasizing instead the “society of angels,” in this letter he offered the comforting reassurance that loved ones would in fact meet again. “We have not lost those of ours who have departed,” Augustine consoled the widow, “but have sent them on ahead, where they will be dearer to us to the extent that they will be better known and where they will be lovable without any fear of our losing them.” Augustine’s letter to Italica supplied Bolton with the authority he needed to justify the heavenly reunion of spouses. Whether husbands and wives are actually “married” in heaven is not important, he declares, but we can be certain that we will know each other there. “Society is not comfortable,” he affirms, “without familiar acquaintance: Be assured then, it shall not be wanting in the height and perfection of all glory, blisse, and joy.”

When John Donne writes to his friend Lady Kingsmill upon the death of her husband in 1624, he offers consolation similar in spirit if not in conceit to Augustine’s:

Madame, Those things which God dissolves at once, as he shall do the Sun, and Moon, those bodies at the last conflagration, he never intends to reunite again; but in those things, which he takes in pieces, as he doth man, and wife, in these divorces, by death, and in single persons, by the divorce of body and soul, God hath another purpose to make them up again.
Elsewhere in his writings, Donne distinguishes between these two separations wrought by death—between husband and wife and between body and soul—as the difference between a union that is mortal and a union that, come the resurrection, will be eternal. On this occasion, however, Donne identifies the two separations as alike and turns the discreteness of each unit, which he usually laments, to his advantage. Since both pairings are made up of individual pieces (body, soul; husband, wife) rather than being single, indivisible masses like the sun or moon, they can happily be pieced back together again.

In a sermon preached in 1627 at the wedding of the Earl of Bridgewater’s daughter Lady Mary Egerton to the son of Lord Herbert of Cherbury, Donne pursues this question of a heavenly reunion between spouses more directly. Having somewhat perversely selected Matthew 22:30—the single verse in scripture most difficult to understand as a defense of posthumous reunion—as his text to preach before the newlyweds, Donne works to recover some prospect of hope. He begins by invoking Luke’s explanation for Christ’s proscription of heavenly marriage, spelled out in his version of the same exchange between Jesus and the Sadducees:

The children of this world marry, and are given in marriage; But they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage; Neither can they die any more. (Luke 20:34–36)

Christ declared that they shall not marry, Donne begins, “Because they cannot dy. Because they have an eternity in themselves, they need not supply any defect, by a propagation of children.” “But yet,” he protests, molding the verse in his hands, “though Christ exclude that, of which there is clearly no use in heaven, Mariage, (because they need no physick, no mutuall help, no supply of children) yet he excludes not our knowing, or our loving of one another upon former knowledge in this world, in the next.” “Christ does not say expressly we shall,” he admits, “yet neither does he say, that we shall not, know one another there.” This is the most that Donne can offer his listeners with any assurance: that although Christ does not affirm, he also does not deny the possibility that we shall have knowledge of one another in heaven.

The effect of the mixed message from English preachers and churchmen about the nature of heavenly love is perhaps best gauged by the diverse funerary inscriptions recorded from this period. Here Erwin Panofsky’s central distinction between “prospective” and “retrospective” tombs helps us to identify two categories among the English epitaphs that have been recorded. Panofsky’s first category, the “prospective” tomb, is epitomized by the burials of the ancient Egyptians. These were tombs whose reliefs and sculptures focused on the posthumous future of the dead, with no eye toward the past; the graves were filled with objects deemed necessary for both survival and pleasure in the next world (tools, jewelry, pottery, weapons, and, above all, containers of food). According
to Panofsky, such prospective tombs not only looked forward to the posthumous future: they also attempted to shape that future, to perform, through their representations of the deceased and the deceased’s possessions, what he describes as a type of “magic manipulation.”

Panofsky contrasts the prospective with the retrospective tradition, whose origins he locates in ancient Greece, where the tomb served as a monument, a record of the earthly fame of the deceased. Panofsky regards ancient Roman tombs in the same tradition as their Greek predecessors, offering loving care to the monuments of the deceased in order to preserve their earthly memory. To a greater degree than he acknowledges, Roman tombs also included prospective features: sarcophagi figuring Elysian banquets and celebrations were relatively common, for example, as were images of gods or cosmic figures connected with one’s posthumous life. But the majority of Roman funerary sculpture focused, as Panofsky suggests, on commemoration rather than anticipation. On expensive tombs, the deceased was often represented by a portrait-bust or effigy, which might be accompanied by friezes depicting episodes from his or her life. On less extravagant tombs, inscriptions commonly mentioned the deceased’s social status, means of livelihood, and other biographical details.

Early modern England is full of examples of both retrospective and prospective spousal tombs. On the one hand, there are plenty of tombs that simply record, in a manner that Calvin would have approved, the earthly bond as something to be remembered, with no expectation of a heavenly future. The epitaph for Jane Hansby is typical of this category:

Iane the wife of Ralfe Hansby Esquire, daughter to William Vavafour Esquire, Grand-child to Thomas Manners Knight, died the 22 day of Iuly, in the yeere of our Lord 1617. And of her age the 23. To whose blessed memory her deare husband hath dedicated this sad monument to signifie that with her his joy lies here interred.

The surviving spouse may be filled with sadness, his joys may be buried with the body of his wife, but he does not dare to imagine anything further between them.

There are also examples of the prospective spousal tomb, which, pace Calvin and others, anticipates a blissful posthumous reunion. In the 1568 epitaph for Lady Katherine Knowles in St. Edmund’s Chapel in Westminster Abbey, for example, Sir Francis Knowles expressed his hope of joining his wife in heaven:

…Haec tecum multos
Utinam vixisset in annos,
Et tua nunc conjux
Facta fuisset anus:
Noluit at Deus, hoc voluit
Sed sponsa maritum
In Coelis maneas,
O Katharina, tuum.

[Would that she had lived with you for many years, and now your wife would have become an old woman. But God did not want this; rather he wished that you, pledged \(sponsa\), await your husband in heaven.]\(^{27}\)

More striking, however, than either of these retrospective or prospective tombs is a third category that emerged with real frequency in the century following the Reformation, a category that Panofsky did not seem to have encountered, or at least did not recognize as worthy of attention. This third category focused neither on the past nor on the future, but instead on the subterranean present: its concern was the posthumous life and companionship of the corpse. The desire to lie side by side in a single tomb has no rationale or justification in a religion that regarded the corpse as something to be dispensed with as soon as it parted from the soul. Until the flesh was retrieved and made new at the resurrection, the corpse served no meaningful purpose within Protestantism, and hence there was no possible eschatological advantage to lying nearer or farther from any other person’s remains. And yet, in spite of this lack of purpose, Protestants routinely petitioned to be buried alongside their spouses without mentioning any other hopes for the future. What these English couples seem to have craved above all was posthumous intimacy in the grave.

There are scores of tombs that record the desire for posthumous intimacy in the grave; three such inscriptions will, I hope, serve to convey their overall feeling. In Saint Sepulchers in the Bayly, Sir John Brewster erected a tomb for his wife Elizabeth (d. 1609) with this epitaph:

\[\text{Thou bed of rest, reserve for him a roome, Who lives a man divorc’t from his deare wife: And as they were one heart, so this one Tombe May hold them neere in death, as linckt in life. Shee’s gone before, And after comes her head; to sleepe with her Among the blessed dead.}\]\(^{28}\)

The reconstitution of the marriage, envisioned as a renewed “linking” after the divorce by death, will take place between the two corpses. It is a marriage
of sleep and rest, not of wakeful consciousness. Despite the claim for their being “among the blessed dead,” there is no hint of a future life for them together beyond the space of this grave.

Laurence Gibson buried his wife, Anne (d. 1611), in the parish church of Saint Alban with this inscription upon her tomb:

Here lye the bodies of Anne, the wife of Laurence Gibson, Gent. And of their three sonnes. . . . Hoc moestissimus eius maritus, in piam memoriam Uxoris suae, taliq; charissimae construi fecit: eundemq; hic cum illa esse sepulturm sperat & exoptat.

[this most sad/mourning husband of hers, in pious memory of his wife, had constructed [this memorial]; he hopes and longs to be buried with her.]29

This is followed by a series of English verses, which ends with the lines:

\[
\text{One mind, one Faith,} \\
\text{One hope, one Grave,} \\
\text{In life, in death,} \\
\text{They had, and still they have.} \\
\text{Amor conjugalis aeternus.}
\]

The longing expressed in both the Latin and English texts focuses on Gibson’s desire for joint burial: to be “one mind,” to have “one faith,” is to lie in a single grave. Taken on its own, the Latin tag at the end of the English inscription declaring the couple’s “eternal love” may seem to gesture toward a heavenly future, but there is no reference anywhere on the tomb to the afterlife. Gibson may aspire to an eternal love, but this eternal love seems to lie in the ground. (Despite his intentions, there is no record of Laurence’s eventual burial here.)30

In the parish church of Saint Mary Hill a joint tomb was erected for Sir Thomas Blanke (d. 1588) and his wife Margaret (d. 1596), whose epitaph stresses the eternal rest they hope to share underground:

\[
\text{Death was deceiv’d,} \\
\text{which thought these two to part:} \\
\text{For though this Knight} \\
\text{First left this mortall life,} \\
\text{Yet till she dyed,} \\
\text{He still liv’d in her heart. . . .} \\
\text{Building this Tombe} \\
\text{Not long before she dy’d,} \\
\text{Her latest duty} \\
\text{To his Funerall Rite,} \\
\text{Crown’d with her vertues,} \\
\text{Like an honest Bride,}
\]

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Here lyes at rest
By her beloved Knight. (227)

Here the emphasis falls on Lady Margaret’s enduring fidelity to her husband long after his death: she kept him alive, we are told, “in her heart,” and held his memory dear “in her chaste breast.” (Given her probable age at the time of Sir Thomas’s death, after forty-four years of marriage, the likelihood of her remarrying was very low.) But it also makes clear that the bonds between husband and wife, or husband and widow, were, finally, mortal bonds: they expired if not with his death, then with hers. There is absolutely no expectation of a life for them beyond: the reward for their “mutuall love” is eternal rest, side by side, in the earth.

Many more tombs could be adduced, but the question they raise is the same: Why did couples specify a desire to lie side by side in the grave without also imagining the reward of a heavenly life together? Or, to put it more simply, what was appealing about the prospect of a shared life underground? The easiest answer would be that the wish for joint burial was in fact the tacit expression of a wish for heavenly companionship; because that wish ran counter to what their religion and their scripture told them would await them in heaven, couples voiced only the more modest petition to be together in the earth. But there are several problems with such an explanation. As we have already seen, the Church of England never officially voiced an opinion on posthumous relations between spouses, nor were epitaphs censored for their doctrinal or theological content. The fact that there were plenty of tombs that gave voice to this desire for heavenly reunion only emphasizes the oddity of those tombs that did not. What the evidence seems to suggest is that the desire for joint burial was independent of the desire for heavenly companionship. It was a desire, in other words, of its own.

There is no obvious early modern corpus or collection of sources that explores the reasons why people sought companionship in the grave, nor are there treatises that spell out the advantages of joint over solitary burial. But a partial explanation emerges in Sir Thomas Browne’s 1658 Hydriotaphia, Urne-Buriall: or, A Discourse of the Sepulchral Urns lately found in Norfolk, which, over the course of its meditation on the relative advantages of cremation versus inhumation, spends some time on the subject at hand. Browne traces the origins of the desire for joint burial back to the ancient world, citing several examples of lovers who combined their ashes in single urns. “The ashes of Domitian were mingled with those of Julia,” Browne relates, “of Achilles with those of Patroclus.” Neither of these examples—the Roman emperor Domitian and his mistress, Julia, nor the two male Homeric heroes—is of marital love. But the conclusion Browne draws about their motives in combining their remains echoes over the centuries in the epitaphs for married couples:
“Without confused burnings, they affectionately compounded their bones; passionately endeavouring to continue their living Unions.”

Browne’s language here is peculiar—he describes the inevitably posthumous act of compounding the lovers’ bones together as “affectionate,” as if the bones themselves possessed an emotional will—and this peculiarity brings out the paradox at the heart of these joint burials. What can Browne mean by assigning affections, passions, desires to the lovers’ material remains? He can mean only that he understands the particularity of our personhood to be continuous with our corpse—that some significant part of us lies within our corporeal remains even though the soul has presumably departed (the soul as a category plays very little part in Browne’s narrative, and it is equally scarce in the Protestant epitaphs we have seen). There is no evidence that many ancient Greeks or Romans, let alone seventeenth-century Protestants, believed that consciousness persisted in their corporeal remains, so that the subterranean companionship of one’s beloved could bring real comfort. And yet, the simple urge for companionship overwhelmed any rational explanation of its purposelessness.

What Browne imagines the ashes or bones to feel is precisely what people feel in their earthly lives: that sharing a single dwelling, or a single room, is in itself a rewarding form of companionship, comparable perhaps to the odd pleasure of sleeping in a state of unconsciousness next to one’s husband or wife or lover. Those who were not so lucky to be buried in a single urn, Browne continues, recovered at least a share of compensatory pleasure in having adjacent urns. “When distance of death denied such conjunctions,” he declares, “unsatisfied affections conceived some satisfaction to be neighbours in the grave, to lye Urne by Urne, and touch but in their names” (151). “To lye Urne by Urne” was not so fulfilling as sharing a single urn, but it provided “some satisfaction” of a neighborly sort: to know that just nearby, if not within one’s own private vessel, was someone beloved. Once again, the projection onto the ashes of rather full emotional lives, replete with “unsatisfied affections” and plans to remedy that dissatisfaction, suggests either that the soul has not in fact left the body (a heresy that Browne admits earlier in his career, in *Religio Medici*, he once believed in but claims to have left behind) or, more likely, that the body does not need the soul to experience longing or loneliness. The corpse has, in effect, an autonomous emotional life.

Epitaphs for couples that emphasize the prospect of a shared subterranean intimacy do not conform to any particular religious or philosophical positions, including those of antiquity. Epicurus and Lucretius denied the immortality of the soul, but they did not as a consequence believe that our material remains had meaningful afterlives. Ancient skeptics like Diogenes of Sinope mocked the idea that one’s posthumous fate would have any significance. In response to his friends’ shock that he wanted to be “flung out
unburied” after death, he exclaimed: “What harm . . . can the mangling of wild beasts do me if I am without consciousness?” And poets like Horace or Catullus routinely urged their lovers to embrace the pleasures of this world by assuring them there would be nothing but a nox perpetua on the other side.

What we observe in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestant epitaphs is not, therefore, a straightforward symptom of Calvinism or atheism or paganism. Instead, it is a phenomenon that Protestantism, however accidentally or inadvertently, seems to have made more available, or more attractive, than it had been before. First, because Protestantism cordoned off the heavenly as outside the manipulation or negotiation of human prayer—unlike Catholics who could pray for the souls of their deceased spouses, Protestants were forbidden any such attempts at intervention—there was inevitably a heightened focus in these epitaphs on the bodies that were left behind. (The desire for companionship in the grave was no doubt shared by pre-Reformation couples who were also routinely buried together, but it was very rarely articulated in their epitaphs—the Catholic tombs had other work, as it were, to do). Second, Protestants emphasized the idea of companionate marriage in a manner that was unparalleled in the earlier periods, and one unexpected consequence of this emphasis seems to have been a desire to extend certain marital bonds beyond their stipulated term. This term may not have transcended the earthly realm, but it offered a consoling reassurance that there would be continuity between life above and below the ground.

Finally, although connected to issues of salvation and eschatology, posthumous love lay outside any obvious category of jurisdiction; it fell in the useful category of “adiaphora,” or a “thing indifferent.” This was not the case for other questions about the afterlife that may seem to our eyes equally inexplicable: on issues concerning salvation or resurrection, for example, Protestants opined with great conviction what would befall us. But on this question of love after death, the church was surprisingly noncommittal. As a result, posthumous love offered an unusual opportunity for free play.

II

The tension between the scriptural and liturgical position that death puts an end to marital bonds, and the emotional yearning to remain connected to one’s spouse beyond the mortal realm, produced scores of funerary inscriptions that expressed the desire to lie alongside one’s beloved in the earth. This tension also helped to create a powerful mode of mortal poetics. Mortal poetics was shaped by the simultaneous recognition that love is only for and in this life, and that many lovers desperately want it to continue after death. Mortal poetics eschewed the hope of posthumous love in heaven, but its representation of love as this-worldly was intensified.
by the longing for something more that it knowingly denied. There are many significant works that were written out of the tension I have just described, which I explore at length elsewhere, but one of its most powerful and complex expressions was *Romeo and Juliet*. In this play, Shakespeare seems at first to affirm, only finally to repudiate, the meaningfulness of joint burial, turning on its head the longing that so many of his contemporaries felt for a meaningful afterlife with their spouses.

It has long been observed that death and love are inseparable in *Romeo and Juliet*. From the opening description of the Chorus, which announces, “A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life” and declares Romeo and Juliet’s love as “death-marked,” the play concentrates our attention on the tragic destiny of the protagonists. It has also frequently been noted that love in *Romeo and Juliet* is not so much compromised as conditioned by the shadow of mortality—in Julia Kristeva’s terms, the play shows how “erotic expenditure is a race towards death.” But what has not been adequately explored is how Romeo and Juliet understand the future of their love after death and, more specifically, how little either of the lovers imagines anything like the heavenly transcendence that awaits their counterparts in Shakespeare’s sources.

It is Romeo who first articulates the couple’s mortal understanding of love. As he awaits Juliet before their clandestine marriage, he responds to the Friar’s supplication—“So smile the heavens upon this holy act / That after-hours with sorrow chide us not” (2.5.1–2)—with an outright dismissal of the Friar’s concern:

Amen. Amen. But come what sorrow can,  
It cannot countervail the exchange of joy  
That one short minute gives me in her sight.  
Do thou but close our hands with holy words,  
Then love-devouring death do what he dare—  
It is enough I may but call her mine. (2.5.3–8)

What begins as a seemingly conventional expression of enthusiasm for his impending nuptials quickly becomes a rather unexpected defiance of death. This defiance is in fact rather more like an invitation: an expression at once of anticipated satisfaction with the present, here reduced to “one short minute,” and a willingness to forego any future pleasures.

Edward Snow has compared Romeo’s words to those of Othello, who declares upon his reunion with Desdemona in Cyprus:

If it were now to dye  
’Twere now to be most happy. For I fear  
My soul hath her content so absolute  
That not another comfort like to this  
Succeeds in unknown fate. (2.1.186–90)
But in several important respects the two speeches are different. First, Romeo does not articulate anything like the fear that Othello articulates: he is not warding off future anxieties, nor is he declaring himself at the limit of something that can accommodate no more. He is merely stating that “one short minute” of joy is enough to counter either sorrow or death, that the joy of this present moment is in itself profoundly satisfying.

Second, the phrase Romeo uses to describe death—he calls it “love-devouring”—supposes a very different relationship between love and death from what Othello seems to have in mind. Romeo does not strive to sustain love through death, which is how we might characterize Othello’s hope in murdering Desdemona: “Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee / And love thee after” (5.2.21–22). Here, the wish is that death will return Desdemona to her original purity and, hence, render her lovable once again; the “monumentall alabaster” of her skin that Othello wants to keep intact is the equivalent of the marble effigy that will grace her tomb, preserving her beauty for his posthumous adoration. For Romeo, by contrast, “love-devouring death” means that there will be no more love after death. In place of the idea that we find in all of Shakespeare’s sources—that their bond might transcend the mortal world—Shakespeare gives us a clear, irreversible ending for love. In Romeo and Juliet, death is not something that love can overcome. It is what kills love, or brings it to closure.

There is much to be said about how Shakespeare conveys this conception of love throughout the play and how deeply it is shared by both of the lovers. From Juliet’s highly ambiguous declaration to her mother wishing Romeo dead (“I shall never be satisfied / With Romeo till I behold him, dead”; 3.5.93–94) to her fantasy of his being scattered after death into “little stars” (3.2.22) in the sky, she is certainly her lover’s equal both in linking love and death and in denying the possibility that anything might await them in the posthumous future. In the space that remains, our attention will fall on the lovers’ death scene and subsequent burial, where Shakespeare’s break with the tradition he inherited is the most profound.42

As even a brief look at his sources makes clear, Shakespeare’s decision to strip the prospect of posthumous intimacy from Romeo and Juliet’s death scene was entirely conscious and deliberate. In Bandello’s novella, the primary source used by subsequent French and English translators, Romeo berates himself for not taking his own life immediately upon hearing of Giulietta’s death, imagining that her spirit is already in heaven, and grows impatient with his delay: “Marry, she goeth yonder wandering and waiteth for thee to follow her.”43 Giulietta’s final words similarly address the imminent reunion of her soul with that of her husband:

Do I not feel that thy spirit goeth wandering hereabout and already marvelleth, nay, complaineth, that I tarry so long? Seignior mine, I see thee, I feel thee, I know thee and I know that thou awaitest no other than my coming.44 (166)
Similar dialog characterizes all of the subsequent versions of the story, even in its loosest adaptations. In Luigi Grotto’s 1578 play *La Hadriana*, for example, the last words of the Juliet figure (Hadriana) are “Wait for me, husband, I follow you.”

What Shakespeare creates between Romeo and Juliet, by contrast, is a distinctly mortal conception of love, governed by two central premises. First, that love is fleeting, brief, and restricted to this world; and second, that this temporal restriction intensifies and renders more precious the nature of erotic experience. This was an important modification not only of his Italian sources but also of the longing we have seen expressed in English joint burials: it is a move away from the sentimental toward the tragic. The burial of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet is not framed as a cozy or private cohabitation, with the grave as a substitute for the pleasures of a life together in heaven. It is simply where their story inevitably reaches its end. The tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* builds to no small degree upon thwarting the desire to sustain some form of posthumous intimacy. As a result, the play’s orientation becomes overwhelmingly focused on the present: it is neither forward- nor backward-looking in its erotic energy.

Upon learning of each other’s deaths, Shakespeare’s lovers respond with no hope whatever for a heavenly life together. Romeo’s immediate concern is with entering—and remaining within—the Capulet tomb. When he arrives at the monument, he addresses it as a devouring rival that stands in his way:

> Thou detestable maw, thou womb of death,  
> Gorged with the dearest morsel of the earth,  
> Thus I enforce thy rotten jaws to open,  
> And in despite I’ll cram thee with more food. (5.3.45–48)

Like Mercutio’s description earlier in the play of his flesh as “worms’ meat” (3.1.102), Romeo envisions the Capulet’s corpses as food, differentiating Juliet’s from the others not in kind, but only in degree: she is the “dearest morsel,” but substantially no different from the rest. There is no mention of a soul that has recently departed and whom he wishes to join; his only concern is with protecting her corpse.

When Romeo declares his intention to lie beside his beloved, he does so in the context of preventing Death from having Juliet’s flesh all to himself:

> Ah, dear Juliet,  
> Why art thou yet so fair? 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 pallet of dim night  
> Depart again. (5.3.101–108)
Romeo perceives death at once to be “unsubstantial” and hungry for matter; he resolves this paradox by imagining death as “lean” and hence in need of nourishment, but the problem he has fallen upon is one that haunts his conception of death in general: it is always framed in material, not metaphysical terms.

The perceived threat of Death as a necrophiliac preying on his bride is what propels Romeo forward and prompts his decision never to “depart again”:

Here, here will I remain
With worms that are thy chambermaids. O, here
Will I set up my everlasting rest,
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world-wearied flesh. Eyes, look your last.
Arms, take your last embrace, and lips, O you
The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss
A dateless bargain to engrossing death. (5.3.108–115)

Romeo invokes the terms of a Christian afterlife—he asks for “everlasting rest” or *requiem eternam*, the formula used on countless epitaphs over many centuries to describe the repose of the blessed dead. But he immediately qualifies this request, indicating that he means nothing more than the “everlasting rest” the vermiculated earth will provide, not a rest that will lead to heavenly bliss.47 (The interpretation of these lines offered by the German critic and translator August Wilhelm Schlegel, that Romeo “cheers himself with a vision of everlasting marriage,” shows the extent to which readers over the centuries have resisted the very bleak terms of Romeo’s wish).48

Romeo does not, moreover, turn to God, nor does he mention his soul’s imminent liberation from his flesh, as he does in what is believed to be Shakespeare’s immediate source for the play, Arthur Brooke’s 1562 poem, *The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet*.49 Upon discovering the seemingly dead Juliet, the instinct of Brooke’s Romeus is to pray to Christ for forgiveness:

Lord Christ, that so to rausome me descendest long agoe
Out of thy fathers bosome, and in the virgins wombe
Didst put on fleshe, O let my plaint out of this hollow toombe,
Perce through the ayre, and graunt my sute may favour finde;
Take pity on my sinnefull and my poore afflicted mynde.
For well enough I know, this body is but clay,
Nought but a masse of sinne, to frayle, and subject to decay. (2674–80)

Rehearsing the traditional language of Christian metaphysics, Romeus dispenses altogether with his flesh, which he relegates to the earth, while he petitions God to pardon his “poore afflicted mynde.” Shakespeare’s Romeo,
by contrast, emphasizes only his material, corporeal fate: he repeats three times in the space of two lines that he will remain “here.”

When Juliet awakens to find Romeo dead beside her, she likewise makes no mention of their posthumous heavenly prospects. Gone are the words given to her by Brooke, whose Juliet petitions: “That so our parted sprites, from light that we see here / In place of endlesse light and blisse, may ever live yfere.” The compromised pleasures of earth are replaced with “endless light and blisse”; the separations that the lovers have endured are erased by an eternity of life “yfere,” an archaic English word for “together.” In Shakespeare’s hands, there is no prospect of a heavenly reunion, nor is there any mention of the possibility that the couple might enjoy each other’s company in the tomb. Juliet, it would seem, lacks Romeo’s desire to lie together as corpses. Instead, she concerns herself exclusively with bringing her life to a quick end before the Friar might take her away; she longs for death itself, and not what might follow upon it. Juliet dies with an apostrophe not to the heavens above, nor to the husband lying in her bosom, but only to the knife that she thrusts into her breast: “O happy dagger / This is thy sheath. There rust, and let me die” (5.3.168–69).

Shakespeare does not even allow his audience to imagine the couple’s sharing a private corner in the Capulet tomb. In a twist of the plot unique to his play, the lovers lie together with Juliet’s would-be second husband, Paris. The presence of Paris is entirely Shakespeare’s innovation: he makes no similar entrance in any of the sources, nor does he meet his death. By introducing Paris to this scene, Shakespeare not only heightens the sense of lives wasted by adding another innocent body to the newly dead. He also intensifies the already powerful sense in the play that love has no meaningful posthumous future. As Paris lies dying, he neither turns to God in prayer nor expresses any hope that his soul may ascend to the heavens. His focus is only on his corpse and where its burial place shall be. Having come to the Capulet tomb to perform his solemn obsequies to his intended bride—“Sweet flower, with flowers thy bridial bed I strew” (5.3.12)—he requests from Romeo that he might join Juliet in the grave. “O, I am slain!” he exclaims, “If thou be merciful / Open the tomb, lay me with Juliet” (5.3.72–73). Like many of Shakespeare’s contemporaries, he wants nothing more than to mingle his remains with those of his beloved. These are the final words that Paris speaks.

“In faith, I will.” So Romeo responds to Paris’s request, and Shakespeare makes clear that Romeo is as good as his word. “I’ll bury thee in a triumphant grave,” Romeo declares, “A grave—O no, a lantern, slaughtered youth / For here lies Juliet.” Paris’s burial inside the Capulet tomb is then confirmed in the exchange between the Friar and Juliet: when Juliet awakens from her sleep and asks, “Where is my Romeo?” the Friar responds, “Thy
husband in thy bosom there lies dead / And Paris, too” (5.3.155–56). This is a strange response, in several different respects. First, the Friar describes Romeo as lying dead “there,” in Juliet’s bosom, as if her bosom were in effect not “here,” part of her body, but instead somewhere else. Second, the location of Paris’s corpse is entirely ambiguous: “And Paris, too” either indicates simply that Paris is also dead, or that Paris is also dead in her bosom.

“Thy husband in thy bosom there lies dead” could also simply mean “thy bosom husband” or “the husband thou lovest” lies “there,” but this still leaves the problem of the “there,” which contains the bodies of both men, somehow set apart from Juliet. Juliet makes clear, however, that she awakens next to Romeo, from whose lips she takes a final kiss, and the Chief Watchman informs us that the three bodies (Romeo, Juliet, and Paris) are all entangled together. In fact, when he first describes the scene, he forgets to mention Romeo, exclaiming: “Pitiful sight! Here lies the County slain / And Juliet bleeding, warm, and newly dead”; some twenty lines later, he expands this description in his account to the prince: “Sovereign, here lies the County Paris slain / And Romeo dead, and Juliet, dead before / Warm, and new killed” (5.3.173–74, 194–96).

In nearly all of the sources for Romeo and Juliet, once the bodies of the two lovers are discovered, they are removed from the Capulet monument in order to be buried together in a private tomb. In Shakespeare’s play, they are left in the complicated tangle with the corpse of Paris, along with the remains of “bloody Tybalt, yet but green in earth” (4.3.42), as well as the rest of the family. The funerary statues that the fathers propose to erect are described not in terms of a new burial ground, but as a separate monument. “I will raise her statue in pure gold,” boasts Montague, “That whiles Verona by that name is known / There shall no figure at such rate be set / As that of true and faithful Juliet,” to which Capulet, not to be undone, replies: “As rich shall Romeo’s by his lady’s lie / Poor sacrifices of our enmity” (5.3.303–4). The statues are in effect a form of cenotaph: literally an empty (kenos) tomb (taphos) that commemorates the bodies in their absence. There is no relationship established between the sculptures honoring their love and the lovers’ physical remains.

Why does Shakespeare do this? I want to propose that in Romeo and Juliet, the playwright discovered a source for tragic power that depended upon first raising and then denying our expectations for consolation at the end of this death-ridden tale. This is not to say that Shakespeare was the first poet to deny lovers an afterlife for love: there are instances of this dating back to the Latin elegists of antiquity, if not earlier. But the difference between Catullus or Horace declaring the meaninglessness of posthumous love and Shakespeare’s making such a declaration is a difference in both cultural resonance and poetic affect. In Shakespeare, it is tinged with a poignancy that the Latin poets lacked.
This poignancy came from an awareness that the pleasures imagined from a shared afterlife together, whether in heaven or in the ground, were something that the members of his audience had grown accustomed to anticipating. They were then forced to bear witness as these prospects were emptied of all significance on stage.

What Shakespeare gives us in Romeo and Juliet is a couple that resists all of the conventional forms of consolation available for spouses confronting their mortality, a couple that will stake everything on the pleasures of “one short minute” without anticipating anything more. In this respect, the intensity of the young lovers matches the intensity of the play itself, a play that is singularly obsessed with the pressure of time, with the urgency of the moment, with the incandescent experience of its “two-hours’ traffic of our stage” (Prol. 12). (It is not a coincidence that it is in this play and nowhere else in his works, that Shakespeare draws our attention to the specific duration of the performance, emphasizing the nature of theatrical experience as something to be experienced live, in the here and now). Romeo and Juliet becomes, in the end, Shakespeare’s greatest expression of carpe diem.

Notes

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2. Before the story of Romeo and Giulietta reached Shakespeare’s hands, it underwent several modest reworkings, first by the French author Pierre Boiastuau, and then by two English authors, Arthur Brooke and William Painter, who worked from Boiastuau’s text directly. Although Shakespeare almost certainly knew both of the English versions, Brooke’s 1562 poem, *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, is widely believed to have been his primary source. See Salernitano Masuccio et al., *Romeo and Juliet before Shakespeare: Four Early Stories of Star-Crossed Love*, trans. Nicole Prunster (Toronto, 2000).


8. As Aquinas traces in his compilation of biblical commentaries, *The Golden Chain*, Saint Hilary interprets the verse as the “two people of believers and unbelievers”; Chrysostom as the “masters and servant, they that work, and they that work not,” and Remigius of Auxerre as “the order of preachers to whom is committed the field of the Church.”


13. Ibid., 35.


24. Consider, for example, the twin mausolea in the Vatican cemetery with a vivid wall painting of Lucifer and Hesperus, whose depiction was associated with the idea of rebirth after death; or the regular appearance of souls carried to safety.


27. Ibid., 515–16. I am grateful to T. Corey Brennan for his help with this translation.

28. Ibid., 425.

29. My translation.


32. The desire for physical proximity in death was not only expressed by married couples: it also surfaced on tombs for friends. See Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago, 2003), for many wonderful examples of joint burials for men during the early modern period.


36. The important exception to this attitude among Latin poets was Propertius, who both imagined a shared life underground—“my bones shall press yours in close entwining” (4.7.94)—and also envisioned his love continuing after death: “There [in the underworld] whatever I shall be, I shall always be called the shade that belongs to you: the might of love crosses even the shores of death” (1.19.11–12). From Sextus Propertius, *Elegies*, ed. and trans. G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

37. For a full exploration of the literary manifestations of this phenomenon in Renaissance poetry, from Thomas Wyatt’s sonnets through the carpe diem lyrics of Robert Herrick and Andrew Marvell, see my forthcoming book *Posthumous Love: Eros and the Afterlife in Renaissance England* (Chicago, 2013).


42. For a full account of Shakespeare’s denouncement of transcendent love in *Romeo and Juliet*, see chap. 2 of Targoff, *Posthumous Love*.
44. Ibid., translation slightly altered.
46. Carroll makes a strong case for the prevalence of the journey metaphors in the play, always heading toward death as their ending. I share with him, and many other readers, the sense of Romeo and Juliet’s love “already contain[ing] its own beginning and end,” although I disagree, as the following pages will make clear, with the sense of their end as “endless” (Carroll, “We were born to die,” 65).
50. The partial exception to this is Bandello, who relates that the prince was “willing that they should abide ensepulchred in that same tomb”; he then relates, however, that an epitaph was placed “upon the two lovers’ sepulcher,” which suggests that some sort of private tomb inside the Capulet monument was erected (Bandello, *The Novels of Matteo Bandello*, 3:167–68).