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Night and darkness in *Romeo and Juliet* are versatile figures which at once encompass the thrilling illogicalness of love, the ephemerality of infatuation, and the peculiar, complex connection between love, death, and selflessness.

On one hand, night serves as a transformative backdrop against which the lovers are paradoxically illuminated to one another: “Lovers can see to do their amorous rites [at night],/ And by their own beauties,” Juliet says (III.2.8-9). Indeed, Romeo’s “beauty” becomes a luminary for Juliet (her “day in night” [17]), and night’s darkness serves only to sharpen contrast and accentuate that luminary: “thou,” Juliet says, apostrophizing Romeo, “wilt lie upon the wings of night/Whiter than new snow upon a raven’s back” (18-19).

However, Juliet’s monologue in Act III also employs the night/darkness figure to foreshadow both Juliet’s death and Romeo’s, and to indicate the potential of those deaths to spur social change: “When I shall die, /” Juliet says, “Take him [Romeo] and cut him out in little stars, / And he will make the face of heaven so fine / That all the world will be in love with night / And pay no worship to the garish sun” (21-25). Juliet hopes that Romeo will be immortalized in the stars upon her death; of course, such an immortalization would require Romeo to die, at least on the physical level. Thus, Juliet foretells that her death will precipitate Romeo’s, and that the concomitant deaths will bring about change in the social sphere by teaching “the world [to] be in love with night,” that is, to love as Romeo and Juliet have: without regard for superficial social designations.

As much as night offers a catalyzing foundation for the love between Romeo and Juliet, the tendency of darkness to obscure vision, along with night’s fleetingness, suggests that said

foundation may be precarious. “I am afeared,/” Romeo worries, “Being in night, all this is but a dream,/Too flattering sweet to be substantial” (II.1.181-183). Friar Lawrence speaks of the transitoriness of night, of “fleckled darkness reeling like a drunkard” as morning “checkers the eastern clouds with streaks of light” (II.2.2-3). Thus, the lovers’ enchantment with night may be the mark of a youthful infatuation “too flattering sweet to be substantial,” as short-sighted and ill-fated as a “reeling drunkard.” At times, though, both Romeo and Juliet seem ignorant of—or seem to feign ignorance of—this fragility of infatuation. As the banished Romeo watches the breaking day that will force him out of Verona, he calls the same “streaks” Friar Lawrence observed “envious” (III.5.7), and Juliet does all she can to convince him (and herself) that “Yon light is not daybreak” (12). In calling the streaks of morning light “envious,” Romeo exhibits a naive arrogance, believing his and Juliet’s love superior to inexorable natural phenomena. Juliet’s refusal to accept the impending morning demonstrates a similar myopic denial of the inevitable, which ironically (in light of future events) prompts Romeo to go willingly to his doom: “Let me be ta’en,” Romeo declares, “let me be put to death;/I am content, so thou will have it so... Come death, and welcome: Juliet wills it so” (III.5.17-24).

As the play progresses, the night figure increasingly assumes its conventional associations with death. In an apostrophe to the entombed Juliet, Romeo says, “...I still will stay with thee/And never from this pallet of dim night [i.e. the tomb]/Depart again.” (V.3.105-108). Given the foregoing descriptions of night as a kind of lovers’ haven, Romeo’s epithet for the tomb implies a betrayal on night’s part, insofar as said epithet places night, which has so long aided Romeo and Juliet in their love, in league with death, which now separates them: “the lean ab-

horred monster [death] keeps/Thee here in *dark* [italics added] to be his paramour” (V. 3.104-105).

Night, then, seems in one sense to be the fickle traitor Romeo suspects it to be at II.1.181-183 (see above). Still, one wonders whether, in “shak[ing] the yoke of inauspicious stars/From this [his own] world-wearied flesh” (V.3.111-112), Romeo has freed himself to take up eternal residence in “little stars” (III.2.22-25; see above). If so, perhaps death has given he and Juliet a final, eternal union, in which darkness underscores the lovers’ light, just as a raven’s back highlights the snow upon it.