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What follows is the extended introduction to a chapter on Romeo and Juliet. I am not pretending here that this is anything other than an introduction. There will be references to Romeo and Juliet but the focus is A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

‘The Ovidian Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Boy Actors: Juliet and Company’

This chapter explores the role of Juliet as the first in William Shakespeare’s repertory to take shape in relation to Ovid, the Augustan love poet who emphasized and enlarged the roles played by girls in ancient myth and poetry. In one sense, it is no surprise that a Shakespearean heroine would be transformed by an encounter with Ovid: many are, even if Juliet is not usually counted among them. From the early to the late plays, Shakespeare’s heroines discover themselves in one or more of Ovid’s tales, scenarios, and erotic precepts, often to their disadvantage. Some play their cards wisely: Bianca in The Taming of the Shrew, the cross-dressing heroines of the romantic comedies (Viola less skilfully than Rosalind and Portia), and Perdita in The Winter’s Tale do; others, from Phoebe in As You Like It to Imogen in Cymbeline, do not. Shakespeare’s poems and plays hone in on the potential violence of the visual pleasures represented in, and animated by, the poetry of Ovid and the Ovidian tradition that descends to Petrarch, Ariosto, and the sonneteers: this pattern dominates the tragic narratives of The Rape of Lucrece and Titus Andronicus and yet also affects the romantic and late comedies.¹ The pattern represents a humanist’s dilemma, since it solicits the potentially violent pleasures of the educated imagination;² and it also poses a dilemma for Shakespeare’s learned heroines, who have access to the same repertoire of Ovidian materials as their male counterparts but do not enjoy the same privileges. No Shakespearean heroine wants to be
like the ‘wanton pictures’ of Venus, Io, and Daphne in the possession of the Lord in the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*: to be read, pictured, framed, or adapted as a figure in Ovidian myth and erotic poetry is to be exposed to risk.

Yet Shakespeare’s heroines seek out and even pursue with a passion a different kind of risk to be found in Ovid: they want the means to speak their minds boldly and openly. Lucrece and Lavinia turn to Ovid for a precedent to expose and denounce their assailants and, in so doing, they lift some of the heavy burden of cultural scripts for sex and gender imposed upon them by their rapists, who, ironically or inevitably, draw their own inspiration for violence from Ovid, especially as mediated by the lyric and romance traditions associated with Petrarch and Ariosto. Left alone with her thoughts after Tarquin has raped her, Shakespeare’s Lucrece pens her testimony with the zeal of an Ovidian epistolary heroine, temporarily losing her pain in the pursuit of the just word (1296-1302), while Lavina, mutilated so that she can neither speak nor write — violence done to her on the precedent of Ovid’s most traumatic tale, that of Philomela — physically chases down a copy of the *Metamorphoses* so that it may tell her tale and ‘quote’ (4.1.50) her woes. Others — including Bianca, Portia, Viola, Rosalind, Cleopatra, Hermione, Paulina, and even Miranda — do not suffer a precipitating cause in physical trauma but still long for broader powers of speech. When speech is shackled, Shakespearean characters of all types experience the tension between wanting to speak and being unable to do so as torture.iii It is no wonder, then, that even his most modest heroines would speak with ‘Gargantua’s mouth’ (*AYLI*), if only they could. They long for the means to speak with the unrestrained wit (*ingenium*), friskiness (*lasciuia*), and
license (*licentia*) with moral, sexual, and rhetorical proprieties for which Ovid was famous.\textsuperscript{iv} Few of Shakespeare’s heroines, however, gain and maintain the power of speech or the privileged relationship to Ovid allotted to Juliet.

This chapter argues that *Romeo and Juliet* — on the evidence of the second quarto of 1599 — represents a turning point in Shakespeare’s thinking about two cultural concerns that are more closely tied than they may at first appear: one is the significance of Ovid in early modern English poetry and plays and the other is the duty and potential of the theater to assume a prominent role in the shaping of public life. Preoccupations with the moral and political role of poetry and plays in the public life of Elizabethan and Stuart England are more often associated with Ben Jonson than Shakespeare, whose mind is usually thought to be on the economic success of the theater, but Jonson was not alone. Both Shakespeare and Jonson (the subject of the next chapter) came to associate the rhetorical and poetic license (*licentia*) of Ovid with the moral virtue of bold and open speech, the parrhesiastic utterance in which a person delivers the full truth of his or her mind without fearing the risks. This is not the first or only perspective on Ovid’s poetic license available to either poet-dramatist, but it came increasingly into the fore in the late Elizabethan period, and it served as a thorough rejection of the austere and moralistic view of Ovid as a licentious pagan who set the poetic word on the ‘seas of wantonnesse,’ as Stephen Gosson put it, and was appropriately exiled by the emperor Augustus to Tomis on the Black Sea.\textsuperscript{v} At the turn of the century, Shakespeare’s contemporaries were more likely to see Ovid’s life in terms of moral heroism than poetic narcissism than they had been when Gosson attempted to exile the Roman poet from England: as some saw it,
Ovid lived and died for the kinds of truth that poetry can tell. vi What one reader views as an indecent figment of imagination or unruly dream may seem to another to extend the virtue of bold speech associated with parrhesia into the space of the theater and into the imaginations of audience members concerned with social dialogue.

In 1599, Shakespeare presented Juliet’s bold and Ovidian speech as an unequivocal good for the theater of his day, and this is something of a coup for his female characters in general. Shakespeare’s plays, as scholars have long noted, typically present bold speech and Ovidian speech in women as deeply ambiguous. vii Both kinds of speech are seductively dangerous in figures like Queen Margaret in The First Part of the Contention (hawk on her wrist in 2.1) and Tamora, queen of the Goths, in Titus Andronicus: both women are startlingly Ovidian creatures, foreign women who rise to power in the courts of England and Rome through their command of eros and rhetoric. Even in admired characters, bold speech does not effortlessly align with the moral duty to speak to difficult truths, a story that Cordelia and Kent share between them in the first scene of King Lear and that Hermione and Paulina also share in The Winter’s Tale. Nor does it entirely suit the genre of romantic comedy, where it is a virtue in men but a risk for women to disclose the contents of their minds and hearts and hold nothing back. In the romantic and late comedies, in fact, the girls and women who speak their minds and pursue their own Ovidian dreams find themselves at a crossroads: they may win significant benefits (Portia does) but they may also face censure and shaming — the stuff of farce in Taming of the Shrew — or silence and even death (as Hermia and Hermione discover). Before turning to Romeo and Juliet and the differing treatments of Juliet’s role
and Ovidian materials to be found in the quarto texts, I will briefly discuss Shakespeare’s more characteristic uses of Ovid in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the comic version or inversion of the early tragedy.

**Speaking to Truth and Speaking to Authority in A Midsummer Night’s Dream**

‘A good moral, my lord: it is not enough to speak, / but to speak true’ (*AMND* 5.1.120-1). Lysander speaks this pious aphorism to Theseus at the wedding festivities that conclude *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. At this point of the play, Lysander has fully come around from his pugnacious resistance to the Athenian law and the autocratic authority it invests in fathers: he is all compliment to the Duke, and with good reason. Theseus has overruled Egeus, who set the play’s centrifugal erotic plots in motion when he hauled his daughter Hermia to a public audience with the Duke and demanded the privilege of a strict Athenian law, by which he may marry his daughter as he pleases or have her put to death. Theseus initially concedes to his obligation to uphold the law but ultimately asserts that he will ‘overbear [Egeus’] will’ (4.1.177), grant Hermia and Lysander the right to marry, and grant them both — as well as Helena and Demetrius — a further honor: the remarkable privilege of marrying alongside of him and Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. In so doing, he wins hearts and something more: he makes a conquest over the will of the Athenian citizens, who are no longer free to speak their minds freely (however obnoxiously, in Egeus’ case) before the Duke and appeal to the law and constitution. The idea of truth in speech has migrated out of public spaces and entered into the person of Theseus: truth in speech is decided by authority.
Lysander has none of these facts in mind when he speaks his aphorism: he is merely being courteous to his Duke, who has found himself on the receiving end of a startling breach of decorum from, of all persons, an artisan and actor. Earlier in the scene, when he was presented with a menu of unpromising options for the entertainment at his wedding festivities — all on classical and Ovidian themes — Theseus rejected the obviously violent and satirical topics. He already knows ‘the battle with the Centaurs’ with the groom’s party at a prior wedding, and he has no wish to hear it ‘sung / By an Athenian eunuch to the harp’ (5.1.44-5); the death of Orpheus, or ‘riot of the tipsy Bacchanals / Tearing the Thracian singer in their rage’ (48-9), is even more provocative; and a piece on ‘The thrice-three muses mournig for the death / Of learning, late deceased in beggary’ (92-3) is patently ‘some satire, keen and critical’ (54) about the underfunding of letters and arts and not, as Theseus says, ‘sorting with a nuptial ceremony’ (55). His choice was *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*, ‘A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus / And his love Thisbe: very tragical mirth’ (567), picked for its sheer incongruity and, further, its promise not to count as a veiled epistle from the Athenians to Theseus.

Yet when Peter Quince appears to deliver the play’s Prologue, he issues transparent and unavoidable insults to his social superiors, one on top of another, when they expected him to speak them fair:

If we offend, it is with our good will.

That you should think, we come not to offend,

But with good will. To show our simple skill,
That is the true beginning of our end.
Consider then we come but in despite.
We do not come as minding to content you,
Our true intent is. All for your delight
We are not here. That you should here repent you,
The actors are at hand and by their show
You shall know all that you are like to know.

Not since Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* appeared onstage has there been a
prologue more determined to express the utter contempt of players for their audience’s
approval. Theseus is in something of a bind. He knows that Hippolyta does not enjoy
scenes of humiliation, and he assured her that all it takes to amend a weak performance is
the benevolence of a noble audience. His past experience has told him how gratifying it
can be to come into the presence of citizen-subjects who are so overawed by authority
that they ‘shiver and look pale, / Make periods in the midst of sentences, / Throttle their
practiced accent in their fears, / And in conclusion dumbly have broken off’ (5.1.95-8).
For Theseus, silence and ‘tongue-tied simplicity’ (104) are vastly preferable to ‘the
rattling tongue / Of saucy and audacious eloquence’ (102-3).

How, then, is Theseus to receive Quince’s speech? He tersely remarks, ‘This
c同伴 doth not stand upon points’ (118): this is a dicey moment in the wedding
festivities, for the term ‘fellow,’ which can be elevating in other contexts, is meant to
reinforce the vast social distance between Quince and the duke. At this point, Lysander
steps into the breach to agree that Quince ‘knows not the stop’ (120): he does not follow
the punctuation of his complimentary speech, and he does not know when to stop talking
— an observation that hews closely to criticisms of Ovid (he did not know when to leave well enough alone, according to Aemilius Scaurus). Lysander then offers his aphorism on speaking true, Hippolyta supportively remarks that the actor performing the prologue has uttered ‘a sound, but not in government’ (123), and Theseus recovers his composure. The prologue has not challenged his authority: ‘is ‘all disordered,’ he says, but ‘nothing impaired’ (124-5). ‘Who’s next?’ he asks, brushing aside the abundant signs he has received that disordered speech may in fact have a ‘point’ that undoes the ostensible compliment to authority: if the prologue, looked on rightly, is nothing more than the socially normative flattery expected of underlings, then Quince’s improper performance of his part is at best meaningless (as one editor puts it) and, if not, it is back talk.\textsuperscript{ix}

The play’s critics have long recognized the ambiguity and tension in the social interactions of the artisan-players and the aristocratic audience: the artisans struggle mightily with the most basic rules of theatrical performance, but the aristocrats wholly fail to soften the effects of their own insensitivity. They fail to grasp that the artisanactors have a motive for dispelling the theatrical illusion with a \textit{gradatio} of literalisms. What is at issue is their social precariousness: the duke is the final arbiter of their success or failure and, more to the point, he is the arbiter of their intentions. He has the authority to tell them what they mean when they speak. Rather than risk offense, they defang their play, beginning with the figure of the lion, who is no lion, as they plan in advance to explain, but really Snug the Joiner (1.2 and 3.1). The absurd literalisms escalate, in a fantastically anti-theatrical mode, and each one casts light on the steps that actors in any age, and chiefly Shakespeare’s company in the 1590s, may take to mitigate
the risks of offense. An actor (Snout — in some sense an Anglicism for Ovidius Publius Naso, or nose) is cast as the wall separating Pyramus and Thisbe, while another, Starveling, takes on the role of the moonlight that helps the two lovers find their way to Ninus’ (Ninny’s) tomb. The play’s critics, who are sensitive to the concerns of the artisans who bungle theatrical illusions and classical allusions as well as their punctuation marks, generally link the social aggression in this scene to the aristocratic audience. The Norton editor, for instance, notes that performances of this scene may ‘range from innocuous banter to cruel intimidation’ (p. 1089), but does not consider the possibility that social challenges may come from below as well as above. The artisan-actors do not intend the insults of their script but the actors in Shakespeare’s company who play the artisans suggest another story. The play-within-the-play mocks authority with the license permitted to fools, which is far wider than that allowed to contemporary players and playwrights, who are subject to the authority of the Master of Revels, and that is the first stop in the ‘chain’ of ‘government’ (123–4). One target of the mockery is the failure of the aristocratic audience to accept the possibility that low-ranking Athenian citizens may disapprove of their social superiors and find the means to say so.

Is it shuttles back and forth between the poles of the artisan performers and their aristocratic audience, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* opens up a new space for the return of the repressed — namely, the wild treatment of hierarchies, proprieties, and norms that permeates the middle scenes of the play — in its last and most ceremonial act. The recreative and anarchic energies of the scenes set in the woods outside Athens, where anything can happen — especially with the assistance of the fairies — are funneled into
the hilarious and yet magical performance of Ovid’s tale of Pyramus and Thisbe. The key to the theatrical magic of the play-within-the-play is its Ovidian wit, which forges lively bonds between the players of Shakespeare’s company and their audiences and also between the printed text and its readers. While playing dumb, the play activates the recreative wit of clever and impatient schoolboys who master the lessons of their learned schoolmasters while resisting their mastery.⁸ Ninus’ tomb — in which the Babylonian emperor and husband of the far more famous Semiramis is interred — becomes ‘Ninny’s tomb,’ suggesting the free-fall of gender and hierarchy into which Shakespeare’s comedy sends some of its patriarchal authorities and from which none is entirely exempt. The sexual jokes, as critics from Annabel Patterson to Patricia Parker have demonstrated, evoke sex acts that have nothing to do with the norms and pieties of marriage and, consequently, recall and reawaken the play’s earlier theory of desire as rooted in the polymorphic perverse (i.e., human beings can love anything, so long as moves). The jokes begin with the hymeneal wall, made of ‘lime and hair’ (165) — and played by Snout the Joiner as, I think, a version of the metmorphic Ovid — is ‘the wittiest partition,’ that Demetrius and Theseus ever ‘heard discourse’ (166). The orality of sex only grows when Thisbe, played by Flute, tells Wall how her ‘cherry lips have often kissed thy stones, / Thy stones with lime and hair knit up’ (188-9).

The metamorphic character of sexuality finds its next expression in the oaths, based on mythic lovers in Ovid’s poetry, that Flute/Thisbe and Bottom/Pyramus swear to each other. ‘Helen’ and ‘Lemander’ (194-5) may be simple blunders for Hero and
Leander, but ‘Shaphalus and Procrus’ are not blunders for Cephalus and Procris, the
unluckiest spouses in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. They are ‘metaformations,’ in apt phrase
of Frederick Ahl.\textsuperscript{xi} There are only two lines, but they speak volumes:

\begin{quote}
BOTTOM [as Pyramus] Not Shaphalus to Procrus was so true.

FLUTE [as Thisbe] As Shaphalus to Procrus, I to you. ((196-7))
\end{quote}

There first joke deals with fidelity: the mythic hero Cephalus tested the faith of his wife,
Procris, by putting on a disguise and offering her bribes, only to reject her when she
hesitated; she fled (to live with Minos in some accounts, and Diana in others), and
eventually returned with gifts of reconciliation, namely a dog that never loses the spoor
and a javelin that never misses the mark; only in some accounts of the myth, she returns
disguised as a boy and uses these items while hunting alongside Cephalus as bribes for
sex — he is to give what ‘what boys are accostumed to give’ — and Cephalus readily
accepts. And in all accounts, the marriage comes to an end when Cephalus accidentally
kills his wife with the javelin: she thought he might be cheating on her and so followed
him on a hunt and hid in the bushes, where the sound of her rustling led him to think,
impulsively, that he had found big game, and so he launched his never-failing javelin at
the brush. There is secondly a joke based on names and anatomy. Cephalus in Greek
refers to the ‘head,’ but ‘Shaphalus’ does not: it is transparently a pun on ‘phallus’ and
the javelin or ‘shaft’ that the hero of myth launched at his wife. Yet ‘Procrus’ cannot
refer to a wife: the feminine ending of the Greek name, Procris, has morphed into the
masculine ending in Latin and thus transformed the unhappy and jealous pair into a far
happier and all-male couple. The lovers’ dialogue appropriately ends on an image of the
sex act now known as rimming: “O kiss me through the hole of this vile wall,’ says
Bottom/Pyramus, ‘I kiss the wall’s hole, not your lips at all’ (198-9).xii

It is safe to say that Ovid is on the side of the rebels and aspirants — namely, the
girls, women, and artisan-actors — of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Yet the play
vacillates when it comes to delivering its romantic and ideological plots into the hands of
women. In *Dream*, the play’s initially ties its most potent, and poetic, dreams of social
change and metamorphosis to the erotic and social energies of the play’s girls and
women. These are the first characters to draw on Ovidian materials to assert their own
desires and resistance to the patriarchal authority asserted by the farcical Egeus (an angry
father derived from Roman New Comedy), the ‘jealous’ Oberon, and the more
charismatic Theseus. The play’s Ovidian materials and subtexts are thus framed as
contributions to its visionary dimension — in which poetry, plays, and imagination may
potentially shape new forms of social reality. In short, Shakespeare develops an Ovidian
counterplot to the patriarchal plot that focuses on Theseus and Oberon and, in the
influential reading by Louis Montrose, taps into cultural fantasies of female subjugation
in late Elizabethan England, where ambivalence about female rule grew as the English
queen aged. I have already demonstrated that the passion for speaking boldly and
fearlessly may begin with Hermia and Helena in the play’s first scene but it does not end
with them. Ovid’s unrestrained wit (*ingenium*), friskiness (*lasciuia*), and license
(licentia) with moral, sexual, and rhetorical proprieties dominate the play’s last act, but they bypass the formerly bold women, who remain largely silent: they belong instead to the artisan-actors and to Shakespeare’s actors.

I conclude my reading of A Midsummer Night’s Dream with a brief discussion of the Ovidian dimensions of the plot of Oberon to humiliate Titania, his non-compliant wife and queen, when she refuses to subordinate her desire to his. The Queen and King of Fairies, as all readers remember even if they do not all entirely understand, are locked in a struggle of which of them has the greater custody rights to an Indian boy. Oberon’s efforts to shame his wife by compelling her to fall in love beneath her station and against nature are Herculean — and misogynistic — exercises in patriarchal discipline. Yet his actions are also caught up in larger myths, whose directions are beyond Oberon’s control. The myths on which he draws his power are profoundly Ovidian: even the ‘love juice’ he uses to anoint the sleeping Titania’s eyes is a distillation of Ovidian myths about flowers, wounds, and Cupid as the armed god of love. His plans for the shaming of his own shrew, Titania, moreover, descend from the ancient and ‘antic’ myths relayed in Ovid’s poetry: he hopes for humiliation on the scale of Ovid’s Pasiphae, forced by the gods to love a bull, when he imagines Titania falling in love at first sight — and, more importantly, at his behest — with a ‘lion, bear, or wolf, or bull,’ ‘meddling monkey,’ or ‘busy ape’ (2.1.180-181). Oberon gets lucky when Titania awakes, with the love juice on her eyes, for the first object that comes into her view is the Bottom the Weaver, fresh from his metamorphosis: from the view of the play’s patriarchal plot, a man with the head of an ass is an acutely embarrassing love object.
The view of Bottom from the play’s ‘antic’ counterplot differs, however: the figure on which Titania dotes is the play’s supreme image of poetic imagination and its links to social change. Bottom the Ass is the play’s liveliest embodiment of metamorphosis, translation, and transport — physical, social, and spiritual — and he comes with solid classical and humanist credentials: he is the distillation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Apuleius’ *Golden Ass*. As such, his figure cannot be contained within ‘jealous’ Oberon’s plot to embarrass the Fairy Queen. Titania loses her struggle with Oberon and accedes to his control of their marriage. Her romance with Ovidian metamorphosis, however, is more ambiguous: it is possible to say that she enters into the play’s revolutionary dreams when she falls in love with a sublime object of Ovidian ambition and imagination. Yet her role in the revolutionary dream — in which an artisan can be loved by the queen of fairies — ultimately elevates Bottom only. It is Bottom’s role, not Titania’s, that puts an unanticipated pressure on Oberon’s disciplinary and normative plot: while Titania loses to patriarchal authority, Bottom upstages it.

* A Midsummer Night’s Dream* fully embraces the Ovidian passions for bold and fearless speech. But not for girls or women. The limits of the play’s vision of social mobility and change are fascinating and ambiguous. It is perhaps too easy to conclude that we have learned something about Shakespeare, namely, that he mistrusts women and girls who want to speak, as Rosalind does, with ‘Gargantua’s mouth’ (*AYLI*) at least as much as he likes them. It is also possible to argue, as I am inclined to do, that the play distinguishes sharply between libratory dreams of futures within reach and the realities of life with a long cultural history of placing curbs on the speech of women. That history
extends back to Ovid (who brought it up for question) and, beyond him, to the most ancient of myths. By the end of the 1590s, however, Shakespeare appears to have found his reasons and mandate for changing the story of female aspiration and frustration: he gave Ovid to Juliet.
See especially Nancy Vickers, ‘This Heraldry in Lucrece’ Face,’ and Lynn Enterline’s chapter on The Rape of Lucrece in Lynn Enterline, The Rhetoric of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000). ii Leonard Barkan, The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1986). iii Examples abound: Marcus in Titus Andronicus reflects on the way in which unspoken sorrow, ‘like an oven stopped, / Doth burn the heart to cinders where it is’ (2.4.35-6); and Mowbray in Richard II asserts that his tongue — and entire being — will be like ‘an unstringed viol or a harp, / Or like a cunning instrument cased up’ if he is exiled by King Richard II, who has, he says, ‘Within my mouth … enjailed my tongue’ (1.3.156-7, 160); Queen Isabella, in the same play, exclaims, ‘O, I am pressed to death for want of speaking’ (3.4.73); and Emilia in Othello taps into many senses of bonds and bondage when she tells Iago, ‘I will not charm my tongue, and asserts, ‘I am bound to speak (5.2.191). iv A more thorough treatment of this phenomenon may be found in my essay, ‘Shakespeare’s Learned Heroines in Ovid’s Schoolroom,’ in Charles Martindale and A. B. Taylor, eds., Shakespeare and the Classics (Cambridge University Press, 2004): 66-85.

v Stephen Gosson vi In the words of John Lane, Tom Tel-Troths message, and his pens complaint. A worke not vnpleasant to be read, nor vnprofitable to be followed (London, 1600): Horace did write the Art of Poetrie, The Art of Poetrie Virgill commended:

Ouid thereto his studies did applie,
Whose life and death still Poetrie defended.

vii See especially Janet Adelman, Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origins in Shakespeare’s Plays (New York: Routledge, 1992) and Lynn Enterline, The Rhetoric of the Body (2000). viii Quince’s prologue is funnier than the one Shakespeare would soon pen for the satirical Troilus and Cressida, but it is just as hostile. ix Holland on ‘meaningless’ speech
