"'Hope' is the thing with feathers"[i]

By Kristin Leahey, Ph.D., *Romeo and Juliet* Dramaturg

Theorist Julia Kristeva writes in her essay "*Romeo and Juliet*: Love-Hatred in the Couple":

> The loving couple is outside the law, the law is deadly for it—that too, is what the story of *Romeo and Juliet* proclaims, as immortalized in Shakespeare's play. And young people throughout the entire world, whatever their race, religion, or social status, identify with the adolescents of Verona who mistook love for death. No other text affirms as passionately that, in aspiring to sexual union as well as to the legislation of their passion, lovers enjoy only ephemeral happiness. The story of the famous couple is in fact a story of the impossible couple: they spend less time loving each other than getting ready to die. (69)

The young, ill-fated couple, who unite only four brief times, arguably engage in the greatest literary love story for the ages. They meet briefly across a crowded room; again, on the same starry night, when she is perched on her balcony and he is encumbered by the ground below; then when they exchange vows without celebration, fulfilling a sacrament but inadvertently fueling their families' feud; next in their wedding bed or a one-night affair; and, ultimately, when their beauty and youth bleed into eternity. Their first encounter starts the countdown to their deaths but also marks the profundity of their love. This sedulous dedication to the preservation of the relationship of Romeo and his Juliet has inspired more than 400 years of productions of the play, an overture by Tchaikovsky, a ballet by Prokofiev, a musical that helped define the genre (1957's *West Side Story*), an array of films (including Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *Romeo + Juliet*), essentially every 2-minute-and-32-second pop song, and multitudes of other works of art. Additionally, Juliet and her Romeo have been appropriated by the media to hopefully draw productive attention to conflict zones but also regretfully to fuel news cycles. Twenty-five-year-old Admira Ismić, a Bosnian Muslim, and Boško Brkić, a 24-year-old Bosnian Serb, were killed by sniper fire on May 19, 1993, while trying to cross the Vrbanja Bridge. The couple, who had been together since they were 16 years old and intended to wed, allegorically live on as Sarajevo's Romeo and Juliet.

For Shakespeare, the lovers in his second tragedy did not originate from history but rather poetry. The 3,020-line narrative poem by Arthur Brooke *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* of 1562 served as his source. Brooke's interpretation took place over many months, while Shakespeare set his play over just four days. Brooke's based his poem on Pierre Boaistuau's 1559 French rendering *The Goodly Hystory of the True, and Constant Loue between Rhomeo and Ivlietta*, which was a translation of Italian writer Matteo Bandello's 1554 novella (Brooke was also influenced by Luigi da Porta's 1530 work). Bandello set his novella in Verona, telling the narrative of Romeo and Giuletta and the feud between their families, the Montecchis and Capellettis. Dante Alighieri, the poet of the 14th century *Divine Comedy*, references the two

families by name in the *Purgatorio* of the opus when he recounts the civil disorder, warring families, and marauding in the Italian countryside during the fall of the Roman Empire.

But for this reader, to have a better comprehension of the play, it is invaluable to consider the original production and publication years. *Romeo and Juliet*'s First Quarto was published in 1597, and the Second—a more authentic Quarto, containing Shakespeare's notes, the actor assignments, and of greater length than the First—in 1599. In 1623, the play was published with 35 of Shakespeare's other works in *The First Folio*. Shakespeare died in 1616. And the first production date of *Romeo and Juliet* is unclear but likely in 1596, with Richard Burbage, at the age of 28, as Romeo, and Robert Goffe, a teenager of unknown age, as Juliet. And we know Hamnet, Shakespeare's 11-year-old son and a twin, died in 1596, but we do not know of what. Kristeva and other scholars argue that Shakespeare turns a play of folly and romance to tragedy at the apogee with the death of Mercutio and Tybalt (and subsequently the demise of most of the play's young), as an expression of grief for the loss of his son.

For grief is arguably the greatest expression of love. And as much, or however little, we witness Romeo and Juliet experience the joys of love, we empathize with the weight of their layer upon layer of grief: for their embittered families, for the loss of their friends and relations, for his banishment, for her supposed death, for their few options, and for their lack of hours, days, and years. In Act 3, Romeo loves so unabashedly that he weeps in grief when he learns of his banishment, unable to stand, as he knows he loses not only his country but Juliet for the rest of his days. In Act 4, Juliet foresees a portentous future, recounted with her words of death, sorrow, lust, and love, as she sacrifices everything to be reunited with Romeo, even if it is at the bottom of a tomb. These are two young people accustomed to incredible loss but astonishing and improbable love. And during a prolonged cool-down moment on a seemingly electrified dance floor, they get to taste hope. But no matter "their race, religion, or social status," we identify with "the adolescents of Verona," as grief and love are recognizable bedfellows. All of us who have loved will likely come to hold contempt for the sustaining and everchanging moon, stars, and garish sun, as we will lose our air to breathe and those who gave us breath. As Maggie O'Farrell writes in *Hamnet* of her titular character: "That without her he is incomplete, lost. He will carry an open wound, down his side, for the rest of his life, where she had been ripped from him. How can he live without her? He cannot. It is like asking the heart to live without the lungs." After the death of his only son, William Shakespeare wrote his most popular comedies, such as *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *Twelfth Night* (a work about a twin sister believing she has lost her beloved twin brother). He also writes his most famous tragedies: *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, and, of course, *Hamlet*—a name interchangeable with Hamnet and considered his greatest work. It is speculative that the death of his son influenced his plays, but although we know little of Shakespeare or Hamnet or their relationship, we know he is a father who survived his son by 20 years, and his wife, Anne Hathaway, a mother who survived her son by 27. With the tragic end of their brief lives, it appears Shakespeare bestowed on his Romeo and Juliet a grace that possibly he, likely his wife, and most of us are unafforded. To be sure, what is the benefit of endless time for people who must live without what is more important than air?

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[i] Reference to the Emily Dickinson's poem of the title "'Hope' is the thing with feathers." In 2016, writer Max Porter adapted the title for his award-winning book *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers*.