Essay

The Take-Ative: Infelicity in *Romeo and Juliet*

Julian Lamb

School of Liberal Arts, Faculty of the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia; jlamb@uow.edu.au

**Abstract:** There is a curious moment in the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. Thinking she speaks in solitude, Juliet says, “Romeo, doff thy name, / And, for thy name, which is no part of thee, / Take all myself”. Emerging from the shadows, Romeo replies, “I take thee at thy word” (Act 2, Scene 1, 92). Suddenly, Juliet’s utterance has seemingly become binding: because they have been overheard by Romeo, her words have become her word. But is Juliet truly bound by her words given that she did not know they were being overheard, let alone intend for them to be binding? Using J. L. Austin’s notion of the performative, I consider the nature and status of Juliet’s utterance, its influence on the remainder of the scene, and what insight it might afford into the play as a whole.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare; *Romeo and Juliet*; J.L. Austin; performative; infelicity; tragedy

Imagine this situation. A young woman enters a darkened room. She sees a piece of paper on the floor and picks it up. She sees two words written upon it, and instinctively says them under her breath: “I will”. As soon as she does, the lights come up revealing a groom, celebrant, and congregation. Her eyes have barely had time to adjust to the light before she hears, “I now pronounce you husband and wife”. Understandably, these words come as a great surprise; brides are not normally unwitting participants in their own weddings. The specific nature of her surprise need not (for my purposes) be specified, though it is worth pointing out that a variety of mitigating circumstances could be imagined in which a variety of responses are believable. (Perhaps she is being kidnapped, and her words will later be used as evidence of her complicity. Or perhaps, when asked earlier by her fiancé about what sort of wedding she wanted, she had replied, “Surprise me”.) Whether happy or horrified, the young woman’s surprise would likely involve the realisation that her words have been taken in a way she did not intend. We might further speculate that by being taken in an unintended way, her words have been taken from her. No longer said in private, they now enact public commitment. She might respond by seeking to take them back: “I didn’t mean it”; “I’ll see you in court!”; “I knew it was you, you clever little devil”. Or the world might hasten away with her words—“You are married, that is final”—and this might also comprise a horrifying hastening away of her too. A situation in which words are taken in an unexpected way, and thus taken from their speaker, might be a prelude for that speaker being, simply, taken.

I open with this curious scenario to introduce my focus in this article: the presence in *Romeo and Juliet* of a form of utterance that (for reasons which ought now to be clear) I have named the “take-ative”[^1]. We can loosely define the take-ative as a species of what J.L. Austin called the “performative”: an utterance that does not describe a state of affairs but performs an action within it. The take-ative is more specifically characterised by the fact that its speaker does not (or does not intend to) enact a performative successfully (and might not even recognise their utterance as performative) but is subsequently taken by another to have done so. In the scenario above, “I will” fulfils these albeit provisional criteria. And let me emphasise that these criteria are provisional. To define the take-ative at the outset as a performative utterance would appear to ignore its defining characteristic: that it occurs as part of an exchange, and that its performativity is no more a consequence of...
its having been enacted (by a speaker) than its having been taken (by a listener). (Does the take-ative happen when the woman says, “I will”, or when the celebrant pronounces them husband and wife? Or perhaps when the lights go up?) Given that the take-ative is the work of at least two people, it is difficult to pinpoint the precise moment of its performance, or the specific agent responsible for it. For this same reason, a certain indefiniteness about whether it is a performative at all is intrinsic to its nature. The very fact that an utterance would be taken by a listener to be a successful performative presumes that the speaker did not so construe it. Differences in perspective, including disagreements over whether anything has been done with words, are not incidental to the take-ative, but an inevitable consequence of its being the accretion of an unscripted exchange between two agents. (One can clearly imagine the woman protesting, perhaps against the claims of the husband and celebrant, that the rites of marriage had illegitimately been performed.) I would like to characterise these confusions and disagreements as forms of “infelicity”, the umbrella term Austin uses to designate the various ways performatives can go awry. My broad contention is that infelicities of this kind cannot simply be eradicated by a more precise enactment of performatives (even if that were possible), or a more finely tuned technical language to describe their operation, but are the inevitable consequence of our words being heard, if not overheard, and taken in ways no speaker can fully determine. My interest in infelicity might thus be described as enacting a sceptical turn in thinking about performative language. Though, as Austin says, there are conditions that an utterance must fulfil in order to perform, there is no guarantee that we will succeed in our attempts to fulfil them, nor (as in my example) that we might not accidentally fulfil them when we have no intention of doing so.

My more specific contentions concern this famous moment in Romeo and Juliet which contains the paradigmatic instance of the take-ative in the play.

JULIET
Romeo, doff thy name,
And for thy name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself.

ROMEO
I take thee at thy word [3] (Act 2, Scene 1, 90-2).

Juliet thinks she utters her words in solitude, but Romeo emerges from the shadows to “take” them from her—and thus, also, to take her. “I take thee at thy word” punningly condenses Romeo’s erotic, or matrimonial, taking of Juliet—if not also the taking of her maidenhead—with his taking her utterance as having enacted a serious, sincere commitment. In fact, the latter stands as a rationalisation of the former: Romeo feels justified in taking Juliet because he takes her words as her word. But, of course, Juliet did not realise her words were being overheard. Said in supposed solitude, “Take all myself” is taken to have consequences she did not intend. Romeo’s interruption is all the more shocking given that, as Harry Levin has observed, he “violate[s] convention, dramatic and otherwise, by overhearing what Juliet intended to be a soliloquy” [4] (p. 3). However, in Romeo’s defence, what Juliet intends to be a soliloquy nevertheless assumes the rhetorical form of a speech directly addressing him:

O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I’ll no longer be a Capulet (Act 2, Scene 1, 76-9).

Not only do these lines address Romeo as if he was present, but they are imbued with a performative force that make a claim upon him. “Deny thy father and refuse thy name” does not describe a denial or refusal, but is something like an entreaty, or an impassioned plea. It not only demands a response, but implicitly construes Romeo’s subsequent actions, including silence and inactivity, as being responsive to it. Such utterances are ripe for the taking—as indeed Juliet’s language makes her out to be. That is why Romeo’s entrance,
though unexpected, nevertheless feels so right; though breaking formal conventions, as well as giving Juliet a shock, his interruption satisfies the grammatical expectations of utterances addressed to him. Said in presumed solitude, Juliet’s words unwittingly cast the spotlight into which Romeo will emerge from the darkness.

The following article is an attempt to account for what then happens in the balcony scene: what is involved in Romeo’s taking, how does Juliet respond, and where does the scene leave them? Though my analysis is tightly focussed, I do wish to see in this scene the form of a drama—call it a drama of taking—whose shape and progress, once understood, has a broader relevance. Simply put, the drama is one in which a listener asserts themselves in a situation by taking the words of a speaker in a way they did not intend. The listener thus enacts an interruption to the speaker’s solitude, and their taking produces complications that must be negotiated. Though absurdly simple, this drama underlies the meta-literary drama of the play: its effort to admit the female beloved into a Petrarchan love language in which she had everywhere been invoked as a praiseworthy subject of longing, but from which she had been excluded as an interlocutor, a reciprocal agent, and a wife. How can a language of private longing become one of reciprocity and acknowledgement, a language not just of speaking, but of listening and responding? How can the language of solitary lyric become one of drama? This final question pre-empts my characterisation of Romeo’s interruption as initiating a course of dramatic action out of the stasis of a soliloquy. It will thus be crucial to offer an account of the role the listener plays in this scenario, which I will do, firstly, by considering Austin’s unwillingness to heed it. As we shall see, the take-ative will require a substantial rethinking of the nature of felicity outlined in How to Do Things with Words: felicity is contingent not just upon the conditions of enunciation, but also of reception; it is a determination not just of the self as speaker, but the other as listener.

Though this comprises a departure from Austin’s account, it is made partly at Austin’s own insistence: “Unless a certain effect is achieved, the illocutionary act will not have been happily, successfully performed . . . Generally the effect amounts to bringing about the understanding of the meaning and of the force of the locution. So the performance of an illocutionary act involves the securing of uptake” [5] (pp. 116–117). Austin’s paradigmatic instance of “uptake” is that of warning: “I cannot be said to have warned an audience unless it hears what I say and takes what I say in a certain sense” [5] (p.116). Austin appears to make the uncontroversial point that an illocutionary, or performative utterance, will not be successful if it is not recognised as such by those to whom (or in whose presence) it is addressed. Though uptake would appear to be crucial in the performance of illocution, it receives only brief consideration from Austin. A great divergence of views as to the specific nature of the claim that Austin was making, including its importance to his broader argument, has thus emerged. Maximilian de Gaynesford has regarded the claim as itself infelicitous, “mainly because these aspects of language-use turn out to be a good deal more complex than Austin himself seemed prepared to appreciate, turning as he did almost immediately to other matters” [8] (p. 122). Why Austin was not prepared to acknowledge the complexity of the issues raised by the uptake claim is related to what de Gaynesford refers to as its “striking implication”: “that no privilege or authority attaches to speakers in determining whether or not illocutionary actions have been performed successfully” [8] (p. 126). So striking is this implication that Daniel Jacobson has used it to justify his adoption of a weaker version of the uptake claim, suggested by P.F. Strawson, “that at most the aim of securing uptake, not its achievement, is required. To deny this would be to hold the performance of an illocutionary act hostage to the perversity of one’s audience” [9] (p. 74). (See also [6] (pp. 448–449).) Notwithstanding the persuasive examples Jacobson offers in support of this weakened claim, we ought not accept it as a general principle simply because the stronger claim forecasts awkward situations [9] (pp. 73–74). To do so might risk turning a blind eye to contexts in which a perverse audience does in fact hold a speaker hostage. The take-ative in the balcony scene is one such difficult situation in which a speaker becomes obligated to an audience who has listened with specific intentions. Such
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situations comprise an unwanted philosophical difficulty for Austin because, as Strawson has noted, he lacks an account of the role the listener plays in the performance of speech acts. Austin’s enactment of the uptake claim might be regarded as infelicitous in that it seemingly highlights a lack, but—in paying it little attention—effectively implies that it is not worth serious consideration. However, like Juliet’s words from her balcony, Austin’s are ripe for the taking.

Austin’s infelicitous acknowledgement of the listener is captured in the phrase, “securing uptake”. Uptake is something only a listener can do; and yet, by verbal sleight of hand, “securing” makes it a determination of the speaker. At best, “securing uptake” only tells half the story: not only is it impossible to be absolutely secure, but the very nature of uptake leaves open the possibility that illocutionary force can be attributed to an utterance by a listener. “Securing uptake” encapsulates Austin’s characteristic attentiveness to the “total speech situation” [5] (p. 147), including the listener’s place within it, and yet also resiles from acknowledging the productive role that listeners play in how things are done with words. He had earlier remarked that by being sensitive to the illocutionary force of words, “The ‘I’ who is doing the action does thus come essentially into the picture” [5] (p. 61).

Whilst this pronouncement is true, it also has the character of a self-fulfilling prophecy, one whose realisation instantiates the “I” as the central determining agent of illocution, to the exclusion of the “you”.

Stanley Cavell’s interest in perlocution, especially in what he calls “passionate utterances”, has attempted to bring this “you” back into the picture.

In the case of perlocutionary acts, on the contrary, especially those that track what I have come to call passionate utterances (“You delight me”, “I intimidate you, I hear”), you are better placed than I to determine whether the act has been accomplished; indeed it is part of the conditions of felicity of the (perlocutionary) act that (there being no standing conditions for its felicity), it demands of you to say (and that you in fact say), what its accomplishment (felicity) has been [13] (pp. xix–xx). (See also [14].)

What Cavell says here of perlocution has implications for illocution too. If one is to take seriously the uptake claim, there are situations in which “you are better placed than I to determine whether the [illocutionary] act has been accomplished”. For though, unlike perlocution, illocution does indeed have “standing conditions” for its felicitous performance, these conditions are constantly being worked out: the felicity of my commands might only be realised by seeing how other people respond to my issuing them; my promises assume (or attempt to script) a relationship with another that might be denied if they tell me that they do not trust a word I say. Whilst performatives require standing conditions, they also involve the claim that such conditions are applicable to a particular situation—a claim that a listener can refuse. This is why performatives cannot always unambiguously secure uptake, and instances exist in which “it demands of you to say (and that you do in fact say), what its accomplishment (felicity) has been” (my italics). Romeo’s interjection, “I take thee at thy word”, names the accomplishment of Juliet’s “Take all myself”. And though it was not intended by her, it is an accomplishment whose consequences she nevertheless must bear. Something has been done with words, but what, and how, and to what end? (And even if nothing has been done, Juliet must nevertheless answer the claim that something has.) These questions articulate the curious power of infelicity to produce a drama in which the participants in a speech situation are called to determine what exactly has happened, and how they might be implicated. Where a felicitous performative might also prompt consequential responses, it will do so along the contours of established relations and conventions. By its nature, infelicity projects new relationships, albeit ones that cannot exist, and invites interlocutors to improvise in them. Romeo’s interruption is paradigmatic of the “you” that emerges from the shadows, forces itself into the picture, and engenders action.

The genesis of action is of particular interest to a play which tells its audience at the beginning what the end will be. As Lloyd Davis remarks, “The question is less what happens than how it happens” [15] (p. 57). Given its use of a lyric tradition in which a
solitary poet longs for something which never happens, Romeo and Juliet must address the issue of how anything can happen at all. Romeo and Rosaline are the ideal Petrarchan couple, and Romeo’s Petrarchan conventions do exactly what they were designed to do: nothing. His longing for Rosaline is not simply hopeless love, but the hopeless longing of a play for dramatic action to arise from it. But Rosaline does not require the play with so much as an appearance. The embodied, dramatic action of the play might thus be seen as emergence from stasis, solitude, and longing. Gayle Whittier has argued that “in Romeo and Juliet the inherited Petrarchan word becomes English flesh by declining from lyric freedom to tragic fact”. According to Whittier, the inherently transcendental, solitary, and performative nature of Petrarchan language is tragically at odds with Romeo’s attempts to embody it in the world of the play. Though I agree with Whittier that the problems of dramatizing lyric are not just Shakespeare’s, but inherited by his characters, we should be mindful of David Schalkwyk’s reluctance to accept her characterisation of lyric “as essentially free of the constraints—material, political, psychological—that mark tragedy as drama and theatre”. Schalkwyk’s Speech and Performance in Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Plays shows the extent to which the sonnets and plays “play a mutual investment in interaction: in provoking a response, and themselves responding to provocation, through the negotiation of relationships that are erotic, political, filial and ideological”. Such interaction has its most powerful moment at Romeo and Juliet’s first meeting in which they share the lines of a sonnet, “a symbol of perfect reciprocity” in which “the Petrarchan habit of speaking of one’s beloved, or to one’s beloved, or behind the back of one’s beloved, is replaced by the reciprocity of speaking with one’s beloved”. Speech and Performance in Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Plays remains the seminal account of the way Shakespeare’s characters, including his sonnet speaker, use performative language to transform socio-political situations, and negotiate relationships within them. It shows, like no study I am aware of, the inherently dramatic character of lyric as Shakespeare conceived it.

Though my interest is with the balcony scene, the encounter sonnet does culminate in a moment which will help us account for the take-ative. Praying that Juliet (his “dear saint”) remains still as he leans in, Romeo concludes the sonnet: “Then move not while my prayer’s effect I take” (Act 1, Scene 4, 219). The fact that the sonnet ends with a kiss being taken should have us question its status as a “symbol of perfect reciprocity”. Though granted a place within the sonnet, the beloved is consolidated as the subject (or object?) of wooing. Even by her own words (“Saints do not move”), Juliet is figured as the beloved made motionless by the lover’s words. And though she remains willingly still, the “prayer’s effect” is for Romeo to take. And though Juliet allows its taking, and perhaps wills it, the fact of the taking exposes an asymmetry in their interaction, which will recur at the beginning of their next encounter: “I take thee at thy word”. Schalkwyk argues that the “Petrarchan habit” of speaking of, or to, or about one’s beloved “is replaced with the reciprocity of speaking with one’s beloved”. However, their speaking “with” each other exposes the extent to which Romeo and Juliet inherit the asymmetrical power relations of the lyric language in whose forms they meet. In the balcony scene, this lack of reciprocity will be further exposed by Juliet’s attempts to rectify it, and Romeo’s inability to acknowledge it.

Though performatives are inherently interactive and social, Juliet enacts hers thinking she is alone, and assuming they are ineffective. “Deny thy father and refuse thy name” is self-consciously infelicitous, and has the wistful, insubstantial quality of a performative which knows it performs nothing. Were it addressed knowingly to Romeo, it would have a very different character, fully materialising into an entreaty, or plea, or even a command: “Do something about that incorrigible name of yours!” Taken at face value, Juliet’s utterance expresses an eager hope that names and parentage, being so trivial, can easily be refused. And yet, because it is said to herself, and thus does not really bid, implore, or beseech
anyone, it bespeaks an awareness that such things are fatefully intractable, and that one can never simply refuse them. The fact that the utterance does nothing, nor is spoken with the intention of doing anything, is Juliet’s recognition that nothing can be done. Her unperforming performatives in this speech are thus the mark of the play’s most crucial amorous activity: longing. But where in the Petrarchan tradition longing had typically occurred within the solitude of lyric, Juliet’s longing is overheard by the person for whom she longs: “I take thee at thy word”\(^13\). In that moment, albeit willingly and eagerly, Juliet becomes committed to an impossibility. The world into which she now speaks is, of course, a socio-political one, scarred by enmity between Capulets and Montagues, in which Romeo’s name is repugnant to her. Had Juliet spoken merely in solitude, her love would have continued to occupy a lyric space unconstrained by obligations to family and feuds because entirely constrained by the fact of stasis and inaction. But having been overheard, Juliet becomes committed not just to Romeo, but to the world in which her love is brought to take its “fearful passage” (Prologue, 9).

Though saying that he takes Juliet at her word, Romeo appears not to recognise that she is now bound to her words. It is symptomatic of his saturation in the lyric tradition that, at the very moment of his literal appearance to Juliet, he retreats into the figurative: “I’ll take thee at thy word. / Call me but love, and I’ll be new baptised: / Henceforth I never will be Romeo” (Act 2, Scene 1, 92-4). The take-ative is followed by Romeo bidding Juliet to call him “love”, which would then enact, or inspire—it is not clear—his being “new baptised”. But how would one go about calling someone “love” (let alone “but love”), a word which is very definitively not a name\(^14\)? And how would this baptise him anew\(^15\)? “Call me but love” entreats Juliet into poetic uses of language in which performatives are used as figures of commitment, rather than acts of commitment. In so entreat ing her, Romeo fails to recognise what he has, in fact, taken. It falls to Juliet to bring him to recognition\(^16\).

In unexpectedly prompting an answer, Juliet makes herself answerable for what she has said. It is notable that she never attempts to excuse herself from the take-ative. Indeed, she makes a deliberate point of not doing so:

\begin{quote}
Thou knowest the mask of night is on my face, 
Else would a maiden blush bepaint my cheek 
For that which thou hast heard me speak tonight. 
Fain would I dwell on form, fain, fain deny 
What I have spoke; but farewell, compliment. (Act 2, Scene 1, 128-32)
\end{quote}

Juliet’s conflicting obligations to the conventions of female modesty, and to the sincerity of what she has spoken, expresses itself as embarrassment, a condition which affirms both. This is why she describes the “maiden blush” upon her cheek, otherwise obscured by the “mask of night”: it proves that she spoke truly, but expresses awareness that she spoke excessively, indecorously truly. Fain would she dwell on form, even if that word “fain” suggests “feign”, and punningly infers that her musings in solitude, not meant for other ears, falsified through poetic excess\(^17\). But to deny would also be to feign. And Juliet’s refusal to deny affirms that, as far as she is concerned, something sufficiently consequential has happened to call for denial. The refusal is also aimed at Romeo, who too easily withdrew into the figurative, and intended to make him realise that Juliet takes his taking seriously.

Thus, unwilling to go back on her word, Juliet seeks out Romeo’s: “Dost thou love me?” But affirmations that are so sought will not have the force of those that have been taken:

\begin{quote}
Dost thou love me? I know thou wilt say “Ay”, 
And I will take thy word; yet if thou swear’st, 
Thou mayest prove false. At lovers’ perjuries 
They say Jove laughs. (Act 2, Scene 1, 133-6)
\end{quote}

“And I will take thy word”. Juliet seeks reciprocity, and to do to Romeo’s words what he had done to hers. But she realises that words cannot be taken that are so openly given. She cannot (as Romeo had done) emerge from the obscurity of the night to take declarations
made in a moment of unguarded solitude. Romeo cannot be found out, as she had been. Juliet can only ask for words whose felicity she is pre-disposed to affirm. In a sense, such words cannot succeed because they never truly risk failing. They are excessively secure in their efforts to achieve uptake. Juliet’s dissatisfaction with such performatives implies a subtle awareness that (at least, in this situation) performatives can only be felicitous if their speakers do not presume to know how they will be taken. Uncertainty is not the bugbear of illocution, to be eradicated by more precise expression, but necessary for genuine responsiveness to the specifics of a situation, the uniqueness of an interlocutor, and a commitment to making things up as they go. What marks these performatives in particular as requiring uncertainty is that (as Cavell says of passionate utterances) they demand of the listener to say what their felicity has been. Vows and oaths usually invoke the authorising power of a deity in whose name they are enacted\textsuperscript{18}. But Juliet envisions Jove as having abdicated from this role. He laughs not just because lovers lie, but because such lies are willingly and so easily taken as truth; his laughter is at the expense of those who believe such perjuries, including those who believe what they say. Aspiring to reciprocity, but intimating a troubling asymmetry in their interaction, Juliet falls back on imploring Romeo to be honest: “O gentle Romeo, / If thou dost love, pronounce it faithfully” (Act 2, Scene 1, 136-7). Needless to say, this restates rather than solves the problem: what does it mean to pronounce love faithfully\textsuperscript{19}?

Juliet is caught in that familiar position of the lover who pronounces their love too soon, and who then seeks reciprocity too openly, and further exposes her fondness, and so intensifies the imbalance. Juliet’s response to this situation is a staggering honesty; staggering less for its openness than for its critical awareness of what is going on.

I should have been more strange, I must confess,
But that thou overheard’st, ere I was ware,
My true-love passion. Therefore pardon me,
And not impute this yielding to light love,
Which the dark night hath so discovered. (Act 2, Scene 1, 145-9)

Regretting that she might have seemed too fond, and therefore as having merely yielded to “light love”, she behaves as one who has been found out, and who affirms the truth and consequence of what has been found by expressing anxious uncertainty as to how it is taken. This is why, though regretting that she was not “more strange”, Juliet does not deny the sincerity of “Take all myself”. If she did, not only would she impute herself as having spoken falsely (which is what she implores Romeo not to do), but she would work against her aim: to get Romeo to realise that he has taken something.

Though Juliet’s “soliloquy” dissolves into a dramatic exchange, Romeo still speaks as the poet in solitude with a language imbued with the presumption that Juliet’s uptake is something it can secure. For this reason, his vows cannot be taken, and must be refused.

ROMEO
Lady, by yonder blesséd moon I vow,
That tips with silver all these fruit tree-tops –

JULIET
O swear not by the moon, th’inconstant moon,
The monthly changes in her circled orb,
Lest that thy love likewise prove variable.

ROMEO
What shall I swear by?

JULIET
Do not swear at all,
Or if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self,
Which is the god of my idolatry,
And I’ll believe thee.

ROMEO
If my heart’s dear love –
JULIET
Well, do not swear. (Act 2, Scene 1, 150-9)

Perhaps startled that Juliet should interrupt so poetic a pronouncement, Romeo slips out of lyric mode—“What shall I swear by?”—thereby exposing his swearing all the more obviously as a performance. It is a performance that attempts to achieve felicity not by genuinely addressing its audience, but by fidelity to a poetic ideal: these are the sorts of pronouncements a poetic lover is likely to say. What makes them unable to earn Juliet’s belief is that they treat it as something that they can secure, and they leave no room for her to say “what their accomplishment (felicity) has been”. They do not avail themselves of being taken. Vows of love, especially those made to assure the beloved, must be made in recognition of the fact that they might be rejected, or even go unrecognised. They are not (as Romeo presumes) incontrovertible happenings, or undeniable verbal monuments, but gambits that might fail, or offerings that might be refused, or gauntlets that might remain on the ground. (Nor is there any guarantee that they will be sufficiently construed as performatives to be recognised as failed performatives. A gauntlet thrown on the ground might be taken by another as having been carelessly dropped.)

Though Juliet cannot take Romeo’s vows, it remains within her power to refuse them, which she does three times here: “Swear not by the moon”, “Do not swear at all”, “Well, do not swear”. Indeed, if we are to grant performative force to Romeo’s earlier “taking” of Juliet’s utterance, then we ought also to do so for Juliet’s refusal to take Romeo’s utterances here. I am tempted to coin the term “refuse-ative” to denote the inverse of the take-ative: the act of declining, or rejecting, a performative that (in this case) resists being taken because it assumes to secure its own uptake. Refuse-atives might thus be said to serve the dual function of recognising a performative and denying its felicity. In so doing, they are similar to take-atives in that they make a claim that the listener is in the best position to determine the felicity of an utterance. This is not to say that such a claim is true, or uncontroversial, only that take-atives and refuse-atives enact it. And by enacting it, Juliet wants Romeo to acknowledge the crucial role that they each play as the “you” of an amorous exchange. By refusing his hackneyed pronouncements, she tries to get him to recognise the felicity of his having taken her word, for which his vows are a poor exchange. That is why we regard her refusals (do we not?) as a very powerful expression of her love, and that, by contrast, we would think it but “light love” if she accepted Romeo’s vows. Juliet’s refuse-atives expose the insularity of a lyric love language that was never intended to be overheard by the beloved, but which has found its way into the speech situation of a play. As is often said, Romeo swears by a book too often read and copied (n. 150-1). Certainly, cliché does not pay sufficient homage to Juliet’s singularity, and might even comprise a dis-acknowledgement of it. We must further note that her singularity is not limited to personal uniqueness, but to her capacity to answer back as she pleases. There is a delightful irony here: after centuries of anguish in solitude, the lyric poet finally gains an audience with his beloved, only to have her tell him, “Stop it with all this poetry!”

However, Juliet’s refusal of Romeo’s vows might seem odd given that she had earlier assured him that she would take his word if, when asked if he loved her, he said, “Ay” (Act 2, Scene 1, 133-4). The problem is that Romeo is incapable of so simple a phrase as “Ay”. Some scholars have regarded his recourse to swearing as itself objectionable to Juliet because it exposes an inherent lack (and potential dishonesty) in his simply saying, “Ay”. Juliet’s imploring him, “If thou dost love, pronounce it faithfully”, is said partly in exasperation over Romeo’s relentless inability to give a plain, non-poetic answer to any of her queries: Who are you? How did you scale the orchard walls? What if they find you?) But if Juliet is suspicious of swearing, she nevertheless construes their exchange as having been an attempt to establish a contractual obligation.

Well, do not swear. Although I joy in thee,
I have no joy in this contract tonight:
It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden,
Too like the lightning which doth cease to be
Ere one can say ‘It lightens’. (Act 2, Scene 1, 159-63)

What exactly is this “contract” for which Juliet claims to have no joy? Editors often note that she refers to lovers’ vows, with an oblique reference to betrothal. Yet, it is difficult to imagine that Juliet would grant contractual status to Romeo’s vows given her unceremonious rejection of them. One possibility is that “this contract” refers not to any commitment they have actually made but to one whose verbal formulation is still in the process of being found. The words “this contract” are therefore not simply constative, in that they refer to an existing contract, but performative, in that they construe the preceding exchange as an attempt to find a language that can bind, or obligate, or commit its speakers to each other. Juliet’s refuse-atives do not simply refuse Romeo’s vows but provoke him to take seriously the effort to find better ones.

Juliet might be compared to a bride who has said her vows, but who realises that her groom cannot find the words to say his, and whose attempts fall increasingly short of reciprocating what she has already given. She stands by her word, “Take all myself”, but Romeo has not yet found the words that she will have him stand by. To Juliet’s further frustration, Romeo remains unable to recognise the words he has taken:

ROMEO
O wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?

JULIET
What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?

ROMEO
Th’exchange of thy love’s faithful vow for mine.

JULIET
I gave thee mine before thou didst request it;
And yet I would it were to give it thee again.

ROMEO
Wouldst thou withdraw it? For what purpose, love?

JULIET
But to be frank and give it thee again,
And yet I wish but for the thing I have:
My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite. (Act 2, Scene 1, 168-78)

Romeo and Juliet are both dissatisfied, but for inverse reasons. Romeo longs for what he has already taken; Juliet longs for what she has already given. (It is a measure of the extent to which Juliet now owns her earlier utterance that she says that she “gave” it.) Because Romeo cannot acknowledge what he has taken, but which Juliet feels bound to, Juliet longs impossibly to say again the words that he took. But so much is Romeo the poet of solitary longing that he has not the language to acknowledge what he has. “Wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied” is the primal scream of the Petrarchan lover, which here dis-acknowledges the words he took from his beloved, even despite her commitment to them. At this culminating moment, the listener who gave felicity to these words cannot (will not?) recognise their force. In response, Juliet affirms her fidelity to them by saying that she would take them back in order to give them again, an ultimately fruitless gesture that prompts the realisation that the language of longing has led her into contradiction: “And yet I wish but for the thing I have”.

Juliet is not so much left at the altar but not fully recognised as ever having turned up. That is why she entreats Romeo to call upon her, in the light of day, to stand by a real altar at which they will perform the vows of a socio-culturally sanctioned “rite” (Act 2, Scene 1, 189), with the Friar as celebrant and witness. She says, “If that thy bent of love be honourable, / Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow/By one that I’ll procure to come to thee, / Where and what time thou wilt perform the rite” (Act 2, Scene 1, 186-9).
The word “if” does important work: it challenges Romeo to be as honourable as he has appeared, and it thus calls him to be true to how his words have been taken. (See [27].) The tables have not exactly turned, but they are not in the same position. Though unable to coalesce into an acceptable oath of love, Romeo’s words have nevertheless been taken by Juliet as a commitment to finding such words. And Romeo can hardly give the lie to how his words have been taken by rescinding from this commitment. Though in different ways, both Romeo and Juliet are thus beholden to how their words have been received, and they are committed to embodying and playing out their implications. I feel inclined to say that, by the end of the balcony scene, their words have taken them.

In a much-discussed moment in How to do Things with Words, Austin quotes from the Hippolytus of Euripides: “my tongue swore to, but my heart (or other backstage artiste) did not” [5] (pp. 9–10). This quotation appears in a discussion of felicity, and (as Austin’s parenthetical remark suggests) it is used to show that a performative is felicitously enacted by virtue of the saying of words, rather than in some internal, spiritual act performed by the speaker. What is less frequently noted is that Hippolytus stays true to his word, even despite his claiming not to have fully intended it. Though he appears in a discussion of infelicity, Hippolytus is a paradigmatic example of Austin’s point that “our word is our bond” [5] (p. 10), a measure of which is the unforeseen tragic implications of an oath whose felicity he does not doubt. Insofar as a performative may compel us to act in disadvantageous or sacrificial ways, it is not our utterances that belongs to us, but we who belong to our utterances. Cavell has read Austin’s use of the Hippolytus as “inscribing the relation of his work on performative utterances to the realm of the tragic”, and he has connected this moment to a form of speech act which Austin elsewhere treats upon, and in which Hippolytus does not indulge: an excuse [28] (p. 53). “Excuses betoken, we might say, the incessant, unending vulnerability of human action, its exposure to the independence of the world and the preoccupation of the mind” [28] (p. 53). One might extrapolate that the elaborate language we have for excusing ourselves betokens an implicit awareness that our words, once said, are not merely our own, and are given up to the exigencies of contexts in which uptake is a determination of listeners, not just speakers. In short, tragedy is the possibility of our not knowing who is listening to us from the shadows, and to what end. Like Hippolytus, Juliet refuses to excuse herself from the unforeseen implications of what, for her, was an unintended speech act. In fact, it is by making clear her refusal to excuse herself that Juliet attempts to make Romeo aware of his role in engendering a performative. Too stridently regarding himself as always the speaker, Romeo cannot reconcile himself to the crucial role he plays as listener, for this would take him from his Petrarchan script. In this, he resembles Austin, who intimates the importance of the “you”, but steps back from the threshold of full acknowledgement, preferring instead to identify the criteria the “I” needs to fulfill to “secure uptake”. But in the world beyond that threshold, where listeners are also agents, speakers might find that their utterances, which have no intention of being performatives, are nevertheless taken as such. Uncertainties and disagreements can arise, and things might be done (or not done) with words that need to be negotiated, and resolution sought. I have characterised the interruptions of the listener as the genesis of dramatic action (as opposed to lyric stasis), and, more especially, of tragic action.

That drama should have a genesis at all is not only a practical necessity for any play, but of specific concern to one which maintains our interest in “how” rather than “what”. For this reason, I would like to conclude by considering the opening exchanges of the play in which the logic of the take-ative is also present. Specifically, I would like to show how it conditions the emergence of embodied dramatic action from the narrated action of the Prologue. The Prologue piques our interest by saying that an “ancient grudge” (Prologue, 3) has broken to “new mutiny” (Prologue, 3), and that this will be played out in “our scene” (Prologue, 2) [24]. How will this “ancient grudge”—of itself too general and temporally unspecified to be stageable—break into drama? We have so far conceived of the take-ative as being the product of an exchange in which unintended performatives are engendered by an unknown listener. I would like now to consider the possibility that a speaker might
speak in such a way as to have their words taken; that is, they provoke a listener into taking their words in a way that they can plausibly deny.

“Gregory, on my word we’ll not carry coals”. The play opens with a performative: the (as yet) unnamed speaker resolves upon his “word” that he and Gregory refuse to put up with insults or offences—literally, doing dirty work. It essentially commits the speaker to refusing to endure whatever offense he might experience; it obliges him to take offense. From this beginning, the conversation takes its course.

SAMSON I mean, an we be in choler we’ll draw.
GREGORY Ay, while you live, draw your neck out of collar.
SAMSON I strike quickly being moved.
GREGORY But thou art not quickly moved to strike.
SAMSON A dog of the house of Montague moves me. (Act 1, Scene 1, 3–7)

Punning on “coals” and “choler”, Samson says that, if angered, he will draw, but is quickly cautioned by Gregory that such impetuosity could result in a “collar”, a hangman’s noose, being placed around his neck. Samson responds by affirming how quickly he can attack an enemy, but he is cautioned again by Gregory not to be so quickly prompted to attack. Embodied in these two characters is both the motive for “new mutiny” and also the cautious resistance to such violence given the likely punishment. The first six lines of the play thus establish the problem: how can dramatic action ensue when its engendering is punishable by death?

The answer to this problem is obliquely present in the exchange which follows:

GREGORY The quarrel is between our masters and us their men.
SAMSON ’Tis all one, I will show myself a tyrant: when I have fought with the men, I will be civil with the maids, I will cut off their heads.
GREGORY The heads of the maids?
SAMSON Ay, the heads of the maids, or their maidenheads, take it in what sense thou wilt.
GREGORY They must take it in sense that feel it. (Act 1, Scene 1, 18–26)

Although the sense is clearly Samson’s, the nature of punning allows him to ascribe it to Gregory: it is something that he takes. But unlike Juliet’s take-ative in the balcony scene, Samson’s punning is deployed for the taking; it is an invitation, if not a provocation, into a particular kind of reading, one which can nevertheless be later ascribed to the listener. Gregory takes up this invitation. His response, which itself puns on “sense”, also plays on “take”. Where Gregory had used “take” to evoke the interpretative freedom of his interlocutor, Gregory’s “They must take it” describes a situation in which the maids must endure what they have no power to refuse. (Though Romeo does not (to my mind) intentionally connote rape when he says, “I take thee at thy word”, the utterance does utilise the same linguistic apparatus operative here.) The punning subtly prepares us for how violence will emerge: by words or actions in which offence will be taken.

A few lines after those quoted above, two Serving-men from the house of Montague enter. Samson and Gregory hatch their plan and continue their play on the word “take”:

SAMSON Let us take the law of our sides; let them begin.
GREGORY I will frown as I pass by, and let them take it as they list.
SAMSON Nay, as they dare: I will bite my thumb at them, which is disgrace to them if they bear it. (Act 1, Scene 1, 36–40)

Where Samson suggests they “take” the side of the law (and wait for the Montagues to begin), Gregory plans to bait them with a frown, which the Montagues will “take” as they will. “Take” gives the speakers the grammatical means to switch their conception of who is the agitative party in the ensuing encounter, and who therefore bears moral responsibility for the violence which follows. Samson thus suggests something more provocative: biting his thumb. Though more incendiary, this is a performative whose felicity must remain ambiguous in order for the Montagues to determine its felicity “as they dare”. Attempting to obscure itself as cause—“I do not bite my thumb at you, sir”—it
challenges the Montagues to say what its felicity has been—“but I do bite my thumb, sir” (Act 1, Scene 1, 46-7).

Samson and Gregory’s search for a deniable provocation is also the play’s search for a means by which violence can break out in such a way that blame does not fall upon one side more than the other. The Prologue’s “ancient grudge” is a resentment whose specific cause, if it were ever known, is now lost in time. The difficulty is in how the play can maintain its ignorance of causes when it stages “new mutiny”26? It does so through the employment of a form of speech act whose performance and felicity are not the determinations of a single speaker but the consequence of an exchange with a responsive listener. Clearly, there are obvious differences between the thumb biting and “Take all myself”, including that Samson intends to disown an effect which he nevertheless desires, whereas Juliet owns an effect which she did not intend to produce. But what they have in common is the engendering of consequential action by an “airy word” (Act 1, Scene 1, 85) which is made substantial by another’s hearing it. I would argue that this is a consequential similarity, and it brings us to a broader conceptual understanding of the play, which yet requires attentive analysis of more of the text than I have considered here. Insofar as true love and feuding require reciprocity, they also require there to have been a certain mutual investment in their origins; both parties need to have contributed to bringing about a situation either of requited love, or requited hate. In Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare therefore has recourse to the take-ative, a form of utterance which is the work of speaker and listener, and which (in contrast to lyric) might thus be regarded as the very essence of drama. It seems therefore fitting to observe that it is within the tumult engendered by the take-ative that “a pair of star-crossed lovers take their life” (Prologue, 6).

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Notes

1 Another scene from early modern drama to which this scenario can be compared is the clandestine marriage in Act 1, Scene 2 of Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi. In this scene, Antonio unwittingly—or only partially wittingly—performs actions that are taken by the Duchess as commitment to her. Antonio takes the Duchess’ ring to soothe his bloodshot eye, only then for the Duchess to tell him that she once vowed only to part with the ring to her second husband. Thus appraised, Antonio can either give the lie to the Duchess’ vow or marry her. He happily does the latter. A significant difference between this and the balcony scene in Romeo and Juliet is that, in Malfi, the woman is the initiator. The socio-political imbalance between a duchess and a steward of her household means that the former must play the typically male role of wooer: “The misery of us, that are born great! / We are forc’d to woo, because non dare woo us” (Act 1, Scene 2, 350-1). By contrast, the balcony scene struggles to think beyond the Petrarchan convention in which it is the man that does the wooing, and the woman the resisting. In fact, as I shall argue, part of Juliet’s frustration is that Romeo is unable to see that she is an active speaker in the courtship, and that he plays an equally important role as an active listener.

2 Questions of a technical nature are already raising their heads. They here centre on the two ways in which an utterance can be infelicitous, which, according to Maximillian de Gaynesford, are not only reflected in Austin’s felicity conditions but also in his subtle uses of language: “For Austin uses ‘not happily performed’ as a term of art, to denote acts that are open to criticism but are nevertheless performed (his general name for such compromised successes is ‘abuses’ . . .), whereas his ‘not successfully performed’ pulls in the opposite direction: that the acts in question are not performed at all (his general name for such unequivocal failures is ‘misfires’ . . .)” [1] (p. 89). Such clarifying distinctions are useful if only to note where they can no longer be sustained. Even at this early stage, we can see that take-atives cannot neatly be characterised as misfires or abuses because they comprise disagreements as to how they are to be characterised. Part of what makes them infelicitous is that it is impossible absolutely to determine what makes them so.

3 My principal philosophical debt is to Stanley Cavell, whose specific engagement with Austin I discuss later, but whose exploration of the nature of scepticism in The Claim of Reason remains an important (though more tacit) influence [2].

4 All references to the play will be cited in the text.

5 P. F. Strawson and William P. Alston have supported Austin’s claim, but in a weakened form. Both question whether the performance of illocution is dependent on securing uptake. (My warning that a bull will charge takes place whether or not my
interlocutor understands me). They argue, instead, that the performance of illocution requires the attempt to secure uptake, and that the illocutionary act occurs irrespective of whether the attempt succeeds or is frustrated. (See [6] (pp. 448–449), [7] (p. 24).) More recently, Rae Langton has advanced a stronger reading of the uptake claim: that the illocutionary act simply does not happen if uptake is not secured. I discuss her views and their detractors below.

According to Rae Langton and Jennifer Hornsby, this challenge lies at the heart of Austin’s understanding of language: “Austrian illocutions, for which uptake is required, are indeed, in one relevant sense, ‘hostage to one’s audience’: linguistic communication presupposes reciprocity, but reciprocity may be missing because of one’s audience’s states of mind” [10] (p. 81).

Identifying this lack, Strawson attempts to supplement the uptake claim with Grice’s idea of nonnatural communication. (See [6] (pp. 445–449).)

8 Though I am not claiming that uptake is a sufficient condition of illocution (either in this specific case or more generally), my position is informed by those who have taken it to be a necessary condition. Theorists who have held this position have done so in a context highly relevant to that of the balcony scene: a woman’s inability to perform an act of refusal. Langton identifies a form of silencing which she calls “illocutionary disablement” in which, “although the appropriate words can be uttered, those utterances fail to count as the actions they were intended to be” because the conditions of a certain context have stopped them “from counting as the action[s] they were intended to be” [11] (pp. 299–315). Langton has considered the way pornography dramatizes a situation in which a woman cannot perform an act of refusal—in which “no” cannot perform as the speaker intends—and therefore also has the power to silence refusal in real-life contexts. (See also [12].) The take-ative might also be said to silence a speaker, so long as we understand “silence” not simply as the prevention or obstruction of meaningful speech, but the willful re-or mis-constual of what was intended by the speaker. The take-active might paradoxically be said to silence by giving voice. It is only by virtue of Romeo’s rejoinder that Juliet is construed as having given her word at all. This is not to say that any utterance of Juliet’s could have been so construed. That it is addressed to Romeo (albeit figuratively), and that it makes a claim upon him (albeit in his presumed absence), constitute criteria which make it take-able. Though it is not my purpose to provide a philosophical account of the minimal criteria for a take-able utterance, it is self-evident that such criteria exist, even if disputes subsequently arise over whether they exist in a particular situation.

9 Such a transaction is most intensely enacted by Romeo, who “tries out the difficult and dangerous Petrarchan script”: “difficult” because “all poetry, if not all language, balances the dream of transcending time and space over the referential facts of limitation, separation, and death”; and “dangerous” because, though the poetic (especially Petrarchan) word is “performative, Romeo lives out its terms in a referential way” [19] (p. 30).

In this sense, Schalkwyk’s work continues the seminal work of Giorgio Melchiori in Shakespeare’s Dramatic Meditations: An Experiment in Criticism.

10 Schalkwyk has contrasted Romeo’s responsiveness to Juliet’s words with his unresponsiveness to Mercutio’s earlier attempt to “conjure” him: “I take thee at thy word!” is the immediate performative response to Juliet that Mercutio’s conjuration vainly sought, and it recognizes from the momentary singularity of his being the unique integrity of her call and promise” [21] (p. 201). Though this reading rightly identifies the performative nature of Juliet’s “call and promise” (“Take all myself”), it does not sufficiently account for its infelicity, nor the crucial role played by Romeo’s response in making it a call and promise.

11 In more recent work on this scene, Schalkwyk has remarked on Juliet’s “Romeo, doff thy name, / And for thy name, which is no part of thee, / Take all myself”: “Especially significant about Juliet’s solitary musing is that her call is not so much a demand as a gift: she offers to replace his name and the social ties that it represents with “all” of herself. In contrast to her dutiful promise to her mother to trim her desires in accordance with parental will, she now assumes that she is wholly her own to give” [22] (p. 201). Notwithstanding Schalkwyk’s reservations, later expressed, about Juliet being “wholly her own to give”, it is worth pausing to consider the sincerity of an act of giving performed in presumed solitude. I do not suggest that Juliet’s words are explicitly insincere—they are musings, longings, thinkings out aloud—but that she can only be brought to sincerity after Romeo has “taken” them. It is at that point that she is called to mean what she says; it is only after being taken that the words become a gift.

12 There is a stark contrast between Romeo’s nonchalant entreaty to call him by a new name and what Derrida has referred to as the “most implacable analysis of the name” in Juliet’s speech [23] (p. 427). It is surprising that Romeo, who had apparently overheard this implacable analysis, would respond to it with such little understanding.

13 Paul Kottman’s seminal essay sets itself against a long tradition of reading the lovers as tragically struggling against external forces, whether social or natural. Kottman argues that the “tragic core” of the play “is the story of two individuals who actively claim their separate individuality, their own freedom, in the only way that they can—through one another. Their love affair demonstrates that their separateness or individuation is not an imposed, external necessity, but the operation of their freedom and self-realization” [24] (p. 6). Juliet’s struggle to have Romeo recognize what he has taken from her—and that, in a sense, he
has taken her—is one aspect of her having to claim “separate individuality” through another. Juliet cannot endorse his taking, and thus claim to having willingly given her word, if Romeo cannot see what and that he has taken. Though Romeo’s “challenge is to allow Juliet to appear free to him and with him—to make himself necessary for Juliet’s freedom”, in the balcony scene he remains constrained by the Petrarchan tradition which continues to script his relationship to her [24] (p. 21). Kottman’s compelling argument allows us to see what is so clear to Juliet: that Romeo must liberate himself from these constraints in order “to make himself necessary for Juliet’s freedom.”

In the context of love poetry, this is a well-known pun: “Loving in truth, and feign in verse my love to show”.

See Schalkwyk’s discussion on the difference between oaths and promises [22] (pp. 120–121).

The idea that performatives must conform to convention, a familiar refrain in Austin, is questioned by Strawson [6] (p. 444).

Stanley Cavell makes a similar point about Scene 1 of King Lear. Eschewing the poetic hyperbole of her sisters, Cordelia refuses to declare her love in exchange for a third of the kingdom, and thus shows her father “the real thing” [25] (p. 62).

Juliet’s refusal has sometimes been read as a suspicion of vows per se. Levenson notes that H. M. Richmond and Naseeb Shaheen reference the same passage in Matthew in which Christ warns against swearing any oaths at all (Matthew 5: 34–36). Schalkwyk makes a similar point: “Juliet’s ‘do not swear at all’ is a precise acknowledgement of Badiou’s point – that to say ‘I love you’ already entails a commitment that can only be diminished by an explicit vow” [22] (p. 204).

In the Arden edition, René Weis cites the OED (“a formal agreement for marriage; a betrothal”), which itself cites As You Like It: “‘[Time] trots hard with a young maid, between the contract of her marriage and the day it is solemnized” (Act 3, Scene 2, 307–9).” (See [26].)

This stands in subtle contrast to Schalkwyk’s understanding of the tragic nature of the scene which falls within his broader characterization of Juliet’s giving herself: “The tragic blindness and the relieving transgression of Juliet’s call are equally encompassed by her belief that she is wholly hers to give. There is indeed a self that is hers to bestow, but it cannot wholly transcend the tramelling claims of her name as it binds her to the world” [22] (p. 205).

Lloyd Davis: “Our scene is initially laid in a kind of continuous present, yet one that remains hanging between ‘ancient grudge’ and ‘new mutiny’” [15] (p. 59).

That connotations of rape nevertheless haunt the grammar of the word “take”, including Romeo’s earlier usage of it, is consistent with the broader characterization of the play offered by Robert M. Watson and Stephen Dickey: “Though Romeo’s covert activities beneath Juliet’s window may not seem especially sinister on their own, there is something lurking out there with him: a cumulative culture of sexual extortion from which Juliet will have to extricate her love story” [29] (p. 127). When Romeo steps out of the shadows, he steps into this cumulative culture; in other words, at the genesis of dramatic action, one course of action available to Romeo is that of a rapist. Watson and Dickey’s provocative article has us balance the facts that “Romeo is innocent”, but “the world is not”: “the lover and the rapist are often separated by exactly the kind of reassuring conventional boundary that Shakespearean drama is always threatening to blur” [29] (p. 150). The value of this consequential reading is that “If we do not acknowledge the ancient specter of rape haunting this story, we cannot recognize what Juliet does to exorcise it” [29] (p. 154). One of the words haunted by the spectre of rape is the word “take.” As I have tried to show, Juliet attempts to exorcise this spectre by bringing Romeo to acknowledge what he has taken. Only then can taking be subsequently construed as (an albeit unwitting) giving: “I gave the mine before thou didst request it”.

In his consideration of the notion of “civility” in the play, Glenn Clark has identified a “startling paradox” at the heart of the Prologue’s account of the origins of the feud: “From ancient grudge break to new mutiny, / Where civil blood makes civil hands / Unwitting) giving: “I gave the mine before thou didst request it”. (See [26].) Such lines suggest that “civility may be the maker of a grotesque disorder . . . In this context, line four links civility to the creation of insubordination. It implies that civility will reveal its genuine self in the form of what it makes: a mutiny, a foully insubordinate rebellion against natural order” [30] (p. 286). Moreover, such mutiny is enacted not merely against the aristocracy by disaffected servants such as Samson and Gregory, but in imitation of it [30] (p. 287). Clark does not explicitly consider the theatrical problem of how dramatic action can arise from an “ancient grudge.” But his consideration of civility is illuminating of how “new mutiny” need not be blamed on one side more than the other because it is the structural possibility of “a social order in which the behavior of those who claim superiority has begun to appear unnatural or grotesque” [30] (p. 300).

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