

Carmine Di Biase

Juliet and Ophelia Poems

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/LC.2025.010>

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My own Juliet

The small, bare chapel, no music, no crowd
to gawk at us, and when we said our vows
they echoed long, as if to verify,
in our own voices, our solemnity.
Was I wrong then to push the world away
and own that hour, that moment, for ourselves?
The ravenous world, when we walked out through
those chapel doors, would stuff its gorge with all
the hours that it would steal from us; but one,
that one – I hear its echoes even now –
would be always ours. I am no Romeo,
but you have been, you are, my Juliet.

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1-2(51) 2025

LITTERARIA COPERNICANA

ISSNp 1899-315X
ss. 109-112

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Juliet with her Romeo among the stars

Those breathers, Romeo, even as they drown
down there in the stream of time, still think
our story was a tragedy.
Our wise old friar, the herbalist,
knew it was a comedy. Look at him there, still



concocting potions that might slow time down.
And your apothecary—with the tortoise
in his shop, his stuffed alligator and reeking skins
of strange misshapen fishes—yes, the one you bought
the poison from: he too understood.

I met him there on yonder cloud.
What you said to him—“I sell *thee* poison,
thou hast sold me none”—convinced him that this life
outside of time is real.
He spent the gold you paid him, then
freed himself as you did.

Freed, paid, convinced? How silly is this past
tense here, and every other tense as well, but even here
this habit won’t die soon, so rich our language was.
“Die”? Cleopatra there, on that other cloud,
still laughs at Enobarbus, who said he saw her
“die twenty times” with no great effort, such was her
“celerity in dying.”

But that sunburnt queen was saltier than us,
and dying came naturally to her. O Romeo, to die
just once, or twice, how long it took us!
As our maker said, you were for me, as I was for you,
“that fair for which love groaned,”
for which we both “would die.”
How slow the lovely moment was in coming,
and when it came, how we shut our eyes and saw
ourselves cut out in little glittering stars, more bright
than gold against the black of night.

My foolish father, calling always for “more light,”
had never loved as we did love. And how foolish
yours, and how benighted both of them, raising statues
to us “in pure gold,” thinking thus to make us live,
down there, forever. They never learned to shun
the poison that is gold, to see its treachery shining dully
in the candle light.
All of them, the fathers, their gold, their candle-light,
the sun itself—how garish they all were! All except
our friar, who taught me in his dusky cell
to “undertake a thing like death.”

And that “true apothecary,” as you called him just before you came here. His poison you called “quick,” by which you meant alive.

And “with a kiss I die,” you said, then came, as only lovers do, to this everlasting life.

Your lips were warm when I kissed you last, hoping they might still be wet and make me “die with a restorative,” but they were dry.

No cordial left for me, only your dagger, and I became its sheath: “there rust,” I said, “and let me die.”

How they weep still, down there, to see our final scene rehearsed, not knowing that your dagger’s prick would bring me here, just as the asp on Cleopatra’s breast brought her. “The stroke of death,” she told me just today, “is as the lover’s pinch, which hurts, and is desired.” Those invading Romans were bewildered by the aftermath.

The fig leaves by her side had “slime upon them.”

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My poor Ophelia

How it grieves me now to know, too late, that when we loved, you were at once more naïve than I and—how strange—more shrewd, more wise. The planted flower and sapling, the newly painted walls so white, reflecting light aimed at your vision of a life I did not, could not, see. You chose the bricks, laid them out before me for the sturdy house that we should build together, and there I let them lie, and there they stay, covered now in weeds. I never shunned you, yet you are the girl I see in the tale of poor Ophelia.

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I did love you once

I knew better even then, when you stood
before me, frank and resolute, professed your love for me,
painted a happiness unbreakable,
all green marble and gilt, glinting wildly at noon in your uncurtained
room, turning, at dusk, to passion, to glowing embers
stoked throughout the night by the sun's moon-muted flame,
then sleep and joyous dreams when all begins again at the touch
of the dawn's first gentle rays.

Yes, even then, that very day, I saw
your love in black and white, drained of all its liquid colors,
and heard your voice, echoing back to me
from here—from this future, where now we stand apart—saying, dear Hamlet,
“I did love you once.” I saw it then, our withered end,
saw it true, through that foreboding open window,
yet I walked in and gave myself to you, for we too, like fresh
rue, must live before we dry.

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