Resisting, Appropriating, and Becoming the Signs
in *Romeo and Juliet*

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> In this idolatrous love of the creature,
> love hath wings, and flies not;
> it flies not upward, it never ascends to
> the contemplation of the Creator in the creature.
>
> John Donne, *Sermons* I, 200

Mentioned for the first time in the prologue ("a pair of star-crossed lovers"; l. 6)[1], love is the driving force of Romeo and Juliet's "story of woe". Typical of Shakespeare, the play's treatment of this central theme is, nevertheless, not straightforward as Romeo is first introduced on stage as frantically in love with Rosaline, and not, as one would expect from the play's title, with Juliet. The dramatist's portrayal of Romeo's sudden change of his object of desire in a play where the two protagonists are commonly viewed as the model of authentic, strong, and passionate young love is, of course, not coincidental, neither is Romeo's equally verbose professions of love to, both, Rosaline (offstage) and Juliet (onstage). An understanding of Romeo's position within a codified, though unsuccessful, tradition of *amor cortese*, of Rosaline's frustrating coyness, perfectly in line with that same literary pattern, and, most importantly, Juliet's resistance to and subversion of the authoritative Petrarchan model adopted by the lover is pivotal to entangle some of the many conceptual knots (religious, civic, and semiotic) that have made this tragedy speak to different times and cultures. It is indeed through the characters' varied appreciations and appropriations of Petrarch's idealism that Shakespeare re-discusses the worldly awareness of the mobile, ephemeral, and continuously deceiving phenomenology of relations.

1. Romeo, Juliet, and the 'authority' of the Petrarchan Subtext

Romeo's pose as a Petrarchan lover, hyperbolically presenting himself as a martyr to love, is established at the very beginning of his first speech (1.1.158-236). In his conversation with Benvolio, he "trots out", according to Rebecca Munro, "a litany of conventional and hackneyed Petrarchan conceits as he affects the love-sick courtly lover" (2011: 232): sighs and desperation are the hallmarks of his one-way relationship with Rosaline, whose unrequited love is an obvious, recognisable echo of Petrarch's adoration for Laura (see Headlam Wells: 1998). Described by critics as a "burattino delle circostanze" [puppet of the circumstances] (Rutelli 1985: 155; my translation), Romeo seems unable to emancipate his language from those literary codes that, by assigning him a pose, are perceived by the female characters in the play as artificial. Rosaline, as we are informed by the Friar's

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words in act two, "knew well | Thy [Romeo's] love did read by rote, that could not spell" (2.3.83-4); and Romeo himself informs Benvolio that Rosaline "will not stay the siege of loving terms, | Nor bide th'encounter of assailing eyes" (1.1.210-11). Even when Romeo woos Juliet, his idiom does not change: he expresses his love in exactly the style that he adopted for his first lover. Once again, his rambling speech is rejected by his now responsive 'second' choice, who famously catechizes Romeo in the kind of substance which exceeds the words that utter it: "conceit" she says, "more rich in matter than in words | Brags of his substance not of ornament" (2.6.30-1). The Petrarchan lover is now re-educated by one who, while unmasking the falsity of an affected and pompous pose and worn out *topoi*, perhaps most importantly, returns the lover's affection. We can even venture to say that it is the fact that this love at first sight (1.5.41-52) is reciprocated that really matters here, since it is in this degree of mutuality – rather than in the degree of affection – that this amorous experience radically differs from the previous one, as Romeo himself does not fail to recognize in act 2 when he admits that "Her [Juliet] I love now | Doth grace for grace and love for love allow; The other did not so" (2.3.81-3).

To read Romeo in this way would certainly flatten the portrayal of a character who, while failing to embody the psychological complexity of other Shakespearean characters, undergoes several important changes in the course of the tragedy. Importantly, these modifications are, at least initially, determined by the strength of the character of the heroine, who resists (and asks him to resist) predetermined cultural codes in a process of re-appropriation and re-functionalization of certain images and idioms which are typical of specific literary traditions, such as Petrarchism.

Petrarchism, therefore, becomes, as it has been widely acknowledged, the backdrop against which the whole tragedy may be read. As Luisa Conti Camaiora argues, "all characters who died perish in syntony with their use of the Petrarchan code: Mercutio parodying it, Tybalt ignoring it, Paris enacting it, Juliet re-defining it, and Romeo, most tragic of all, self-deceived by it" (2000: 13)[2]. And yet, arguably, it is Juliet's peculiar re-appropriation of the Petrarchan code that is exceptionally functional on the level of both the *fabula* (radically differing from the Petrarchan coy lady, it is Juliet who asks Romeo to marry her and who thus spurs on the dramatic action) and the meditation on signs, which is so pervasive in a tragedy whose female protagonist is constantly alert to those strategies which can free the self by attacking the arbitrariness of the social and political code of the feud (Snyder, 1996; Rutelli, 1985). What is more, this semiotic anxiety permeating the play unquestionably ends up interacting with the early modern cultural and religious discourse and with its possible interpretative repercussions on the destiny of the lovers.

2. Resisting and Subverting Codes: the Petrarchan (In)Sufficiency

In the balcony scene, to Romeo's use of Petrarchan images, as that of the lover's murderous eye (2.2.70), Juliet famously replies by dismissing the role of the coy lady. She denies forms – "Fain would I dwell on form, fain, fain deny | What I have spoke; but farewell,

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[2]   Romana Rutelli aptly discusses Mercutio's uses of the connotative language of the *amor cortese* in order to debunk it in its content (1985: 68).

compliment" (2.2.88-9) – and she also abuses the wooing code by claiming that she will "prove more true | Than those that have more cunning to be strange. | I", she continues, "should have been more strange, I must confess" (2.2.100-2; see also Levin 1960). Juliet here attacks the hypocrisy of a code, literary as well as cultural, that imposes on the lovers a kind of role-playing. And even if we consider as an alternative to "more cunning" the less accepted suggestion of Q2 which presents "more coying", the coherence of the context, as Silvia Bigliazzi argues, is not undermined (Shakespeare 2012b: 106) but is still in keeping with a pose (the coy lady) that is here evoked only to be reversed (see also Gibbons 1980).

That Juliet is perfectly aware of a challenge to what she believes is an ineffective code of gestures and posture is evident from her prayer to Romeo not to "impute this yelding to light love" (2.2.105). The term "light" here is an important one and follows another occurrence of the adjective a few lines before when she says that "thou mayst think my haviour light" (l. 99), which significantly also reappears twice in the Friar's speech right before her marriage: "O, so light a foot" and "so light is vanity" (2.6.16 and 20). Anticipating Juliet's plea in the marriage scene (again in 2.6), her request that Romeo contains his verbal excess ("o swear not by the moon", 2.2.109) can equally be read as a further attempt to 'locate' their love and their selves outside literary and cultural codes.

Romeo, however, is still trapped in his artificial role, and in order to substantiate his love and make it believable, he must swear on something. That is why, unable to re-position himself outside of a cultural code within which he feels secure, and almost lost in the gap of meaning resulting from the obliteration of those systems[3], he asks: "What shall I swear by?" (l. 112). Urged to answer Romeo's need for linguistic and literary codification, Juliet eventually borrows images of sacred and profane love from the amorous poetry tradition. It is not the first time that Juliet resorts to courtly language: their first exchange of love is entirely embedded in descriptions of love in terms of religion (1.5.92-109), but here Juliet is more vigilant to the metalinguistic function of language. First, she persuades him not to "swear at all" and, then, she continues with the advice that "if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self, | Which is the god of my idolatry, | And I'll believe thee" (2.2.113-15). Coherently with her refusal of arbitrary signifiers, Juliet – defined by Catherine Belsey as a "Saussurean *avant la lettre*" (1993: 133) – suggests that he swears not on his name – Romeo at this point has already refused that name: "Call me but love" (2.2.50) – but on his "gracious self", where "gracious" refers both to an outward quality and one of God's attributes, meaning 'indulgent' and 'merciful' (Shakespeare 2012a: 194 and 2012b: 108)[4].

Starting with Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, where the poetic voice commits idolatry by adoring the creature, Laura, over the Creator, God, (on the notion of idolatry in Petrarch, see Freccero 1975), this literary image, which elects the lover to the object of the adoration of the other ("the god of my idolatry"), is intensively exploited in contemporary love poems by George Barnabe's *The Ship of Safegarde* (1569); Robert Jones's *Love is a Prettie Frencie* (1577); William Rankins's *Satyr quintus* (1598); Robert Chester's *Ore my heart your eyes do idolatrie* (1601); John Davies's *Wittes pilgrimage* (1605); William Shakespeare's *Let not my love be called idolatrie* (1609); Richard Brathwait's *Nature Embassie* (1621); John

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Donne's *Elegy VI* "Oh, let me not serve so" and *The Funerall* (1633); Thomas Jordan's *Love's Dialect* (1646); Sidney's *Sonnet 11* and Spenser's *Amoretti*, sonnet 8[5]. In Juliet's words, however, this literary image functions on more than one level. In an attempt to characterize the self outside the arbitrary sign – the object of her absolute desire (the rose without the name) –, Juliet defines the self through a sign which is self-referential (the idol), where a distinction between the signifier and the thing it refers to is ultimately unattainable. The ineffability of the self outside the names, therefore, gains access to the language through a sign which tends to signify itself.

Preoccupied with an impossible definition of a self transcending its signifiers, Juliet's use of the image makes the literary paradigms of amorous poetry interplay with specific religious connotations attached to signs. As with the rose, what we are dealing with here is a further process of cultural re-semiotization which tends to define Romeo's self through literary metaphors which are re-codified in the play and filtered through cultural discourse. Thus, in the statement "god of my idolatry", intertextual and interdiscursive negotiations are at work. Intertextuality, which surfaces in Juliet's semiotic concern about the language, in fact, ends up dialoguing with the cultural (religious) discourse. In this context, idolatry may potentially be interpreted in terms of a new 'religion of love' which at the end of the play is eventually misinterpreted in the establishment of actual idolatry in the civic and economic concreteness of the two golden statues.

3. Idols: Literary Tradition and Religious Allusions in Dialogue

In *Romeo and Juliet*, the intertextual allusion to idolatry as the hyperbolic outcome of desire in the religion of love can be supplemented by semiotic considerations also possibly implied in the contemporary theological controversies about the efficacy and the danger of visible signs, which adds a tacit negative connotation to Juliet's speech. By using a Christian metaphor which interrogates the relation between the sign and the thing signified, the play engages the doctrinal crux of a debate over iconoclasm that explodes outside the stages. Indeed, such an interpretation is not surprising if one considers, as Adrian Streete aptly does in *Reforming Signs: Semiotics, Calvinism and Clothing in Sixteenth-Century England*, that "if there was one arena that rivaled theology in the intensity of debate during the early modern period, then it was semiotics" (2003: 1).

Through its attacks on images, Reformation theology expresses its concern for the representation of God in a context where "the sacred", as Tobias Döring correctly points out, is indeed a "problem of representation" (2005: 10). By radically distancing itself from Roman Catholicism and from its defence of images as the "books of the illiterate" (O'Connell 2000: 288), the debate over idolatry and the Eucharistic controversies strongly influence the literature of the period and, in particular, theatre which, equated to visual images

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[5]   The counts are based on the Literature Online and Early English Books Online poetry database, and include variant forms and spellings of 'idolatrous love'. Shakespeare also uses the image in his plays *All's Well*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Danijela Kambaskovic-Sawers investigates "idolatry and blasphemy as subtext to representations of erotic desire" (2007: 377) in Petrarch, Sidney, Spenser, Drayton, Daniel, and Shakespeare.

by a certain sect of Protestantism, is often considered as potentially dangerous and idolatrous[6]. The inescapable interplay between the drama of the period and the religious context against which it is produced is suggested once more in this tragedy, since behind the literary and cultural overtones of Juliet's words may also lie a contemporary preoccupation with the adoration of idols, typically condemned as blasphemous in the contemporary cultural discourse.

If the issue of idolatry concerns from a religious point of view the (dis)placement of one's belief from God into an earthly creature/object, in *Romeo and Juliet* the protagonists' mutual amorous investment of faith can be read, in the wake of these theological debates, as a possible implicit disapproval of the lovers' youthful and impetuous passion[7]. By adhering to the Petrarchan conventions, and by choosing an image which is strongly connoted from a religious point of view, Juliet's idolatry and deification of Romeo's self ("swear by thy gracious self") may even foreshadow the inevitability of their unchristian deaths (for a discussion on death in *Romeo and Juliet* see Dollimore 1998 and Kristeva 1983: 209-33). In Juliet's problematic attempt to exceed cultural signs, it is in fact possible to get a glimpse of an excess of her passionate nature and, indeed, a possible understanding of the couple's responsibility for a love which is too immoderate, as Juliet seems to be aware when, immediately after the "god of my idolatry" speech, she describes her "contract" to Romeo as "too rash, too unadvised, too sudden, | Too like the lightning which doth cease to be | Ere one can say 'it lightens'" (2.2.117-20).

Time is indeed one of the fundamental factors of a tragedy which pivots on sudden tragic changes – and it does not surprise that Juliet here borrows the image of the lightning to describe their irrational and impetuous 'capitulation' to love. Ironically, it is the Catholic Friar who also condemns this too precipitous love: "Holy Saint Francis", he exclaims to Romeo, "what a change is here! | Is Rosaline, that thou didst love so dear, | So *soon* forsaken?" (2.3.61-3; my emphasis)[8].

By demonstrating an awareness of which Romeo is unconscious, Juliet chooses to 'express' her passion through the metaphorical mediation of an image (the idol) which, in keeping with the paradigm of rashness, may suggest, if read from a contemporary theological perspective, a further possible censure of their love.

Belonging to a literary code, the image, so to speak, is thus emptied out of its original metaphorical meaning (the religion of love in a Petrarchan tradition) and is potentially burdened with a cultural and contextual reading that may impose a negative condemnation on Juliet's and Romeo's love.

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[6]   On the theatre as potentially idolatrous, see O'Connell (2000). Huston Diehl argues that "both protestant ritual and renaissance play insist on the figurative power of the visible sign, inculcating a new mode of seeing that, while it requires people to be sceptical about what they see and self-reflective about their own looking, also encourages them to be receptive to the capacity of signs, in conjunction with spoken words, to move, persuade, and transform" (1991: 151). See also Diehl (1997), Porter (2009), and Brietz Monta (2011). For an overview of the main critical positions on the relationship between drama and religion in early modern period, see Jackson and Marotti (2004).

[7]   See also Helena's love to Demetrius which is described as idolatrous by Lysander: "and she, sweet lady, dotes, | Devoutly dotes, dotes in idolatry, | Upon this spotted and inconstant man" (1.1.108-10). Even in this comedy, the couple's happiness hinted at in the final scene (where the marriages occur) is darkened by the fact that Demetrius is still under spell.

[8]   It is again the Friar who laments Capulet's impetus in arranging Juliet's marriage with Paris: "The time is very short" (4.1.1); "Uneven is the course. I like it not" (l. 5). See Lucking 2001.

4. Death, Transformed Bodies, and Resistance

In keeping with the requirements of the tragedy, Romeo and Juliet must die. In the prologue, the Chorus has already introduced the theme of death ("A pair of star-crossed lovers [...] Doth with their death bury their parents' strife", ll. 6-8). The same theme is then implicitly reiterated in Juliet's words (1.5.133-4; 3.2.135-7; 3.5.201-2; on the bed-grave discourse, see Bigliazzi and Nigri 2016: esp. 175-8).

The suicides, notably taking place in yet another lasting civic reminder of the household's power in the city of Verona (the Capulet's monument), eventually seem to appease the hate of the two families who publicly announce the erection of two statues of pure gold which crystallize the protagonists' private love into a dimension open to Verona's public gaze:

> CAPULET   O brother Montague, give me thy hand.
>   This is my daughter's jointure, for no more
>   Can I demand.
> MONTAGUE   But I can give thee more,
>   For I will raise her statue in pure gold,
>   That whiles Verona by that name is known,
>   There shall no figure at such rate be set
>   As that of true and faithful Juliet.
> CAPULET   As rich shall Romeo's by his lady's lie,
>   Poor sacrifices of our enmity.
>   (5.3.296-304)

The "pure love" into which the families' rancour should have turned, according to Friar Laurence's hopeful words ("For this alliance may so happy prove, | To turn your households' rancour to pure love"; 2.3.87-8), is here transmuted, through the experience of death, to "pure gold".

Some attention should be drawn here to Capulet's use of the word "poor" (5.3.304) set in contrast with the "rich" (303) material of the statues in "pure gold" (299)[9]. The term "gold" is an important one in this play, appearing nine times (four times as an adjective and five as a noun)[10] and functioning, act 5, on a double level. By returning, with possible negative connotations, to the corrupting quality of something which is "worse poison to men's souls", as Romeo says to the apothecary when he pays for his "Cordial" (5.1.80-5), the golden statues can also, in the context of our discussion on idolatry, possibly remind us of the golden calf, the idol of the biblical narrative.

Accessing once more the logic of competition – this time reversed in a positive perspective, with Montague responding to Capulet's offer with "I can give thee more" (5.3.298) –, the two statues represent "deliberate messages from the past to posterity"

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[9]   See the definition of 'poor' given by the Oxford English Dictionary, *adj.* A.1: "Of a person or people: having few, or no, material possessions; lacking the means to procure the comforts or necessities of life, or to live at a standard considered comfortable or normal in society; needy, necessitous, indigent, destitute. Sometimes: spec. so destitute as to be dependent upon gifts or allowances for subsistence. Opposed to rich". And C., *fig.*: "usually with reference to a person's soul, spirit, etc. In later use chiefly with qualifying adverb". On the logics of the profit and of the identity through the social and economic contract, see also Lady Capulet's words in 1.3.80-95 (Bigliazzi 2012).

[10]   In 1.1.117-18; 1.1.213; 1.3.93; 4.5.139; 5.1.80; 2.3.33-34; 3.3.20-3.

(Sherlock 2008: 1) while apparently sealing the families' new 'union' in a world unavoidably subjected to symbols. The lovers' preoccupation with defining their selves within a language of love which is emancipated from cultural codes is thus obliterated in the fathers' last act which, through the erection of the statues, locks and flattens Romeo's and Juliet's identities in the myth of a sacrifice of love. The selves of the lovers are in fact transformed into a sign, a symbol of a necessary sacrifice, as it was first announced in the prologue and, then, remembered by Capulet who calls Romeo and Juliet the "poor sacrifices of our enmity" (5.3.304).

Gods of lovers' idolatry, Romeo and Juliet are then 'canonized for love' and reduced to visual, tangible signs which now stand for a renewed civic reconciliation and, indeed, as a reminder of, and a warning against, civic crisis[11]. But once more, behind the image of the statues in pure gold there still seems to lie a further implicit reference to both a love which is beyond measure (and which is signified by the possible negative connotations attached to the statues/idols) and the fathers' misunderstanding of a relationship which aspires to exceed signifiers. At the end of the tragedy, signs invade the scene. Juliet, the vital debunker of names as agents of an inefficient cultural semiotization, is dead, and names return to triumph in the words of the fathers who will bend and crystallize their children's individualities into civic norms of commemoration by permanently linking their names to the name of Verona: "While Verona by that name is known", Montague says, "There shall no figure at such rate be set | As that of true and faithful Juliet" (5.3.301-2).

Romeo and Juliet are eventually transformed into signs of a community that wants to recognize itself as peaceful. By referring back to the individual love and, at the same time, to the families' feud (see Snyder 1996), the statues serve the community as maintainers of the civic peace, thus contributing to the preservation, and the continuation, of 'order' in the public life of Verona.

Placed at the very heart of a Veronese civic system that, according to Catherine Belsey, "is ultimately responsible for the arbitrary and pointless ancestral quarrel, and which is powerless to reverse the effects of a violence carried on in the names of Montague and Capulet, and enacted on the bodies of the new generation" (1993, 141; see also Bigliazzi and Calvi 2016), Romeo's and Juliet's monumental bodies articulate new ideals of social continuity and resistance (Llewellyn 1991; Bigliazzi and Nigri 2016). They become instances of an ideal love and, at the same time, representations of the city's struggle to maintain order in a city where the temporal and the spiritual authorities are "miscarried" (5.3.267) by those who are supposed to reinforce, and indeed defend, them, namely the Prince and the Friar. The Prince proves in fact to be too indulgent in applying the law, as Friar Laurence recognizes ("Thy fault our law calls death, but the kind Prince, | Taking thy part, *hath rushed aside the law,* | And turned that black word 'death' to banishment"; 3.3.25-7, my emphasis) and as he himself admits ("See what a scourge is laid upon your hate, | That heaven finds means | to kill your joys with love; | And I, *for winking at your discords* too, | Have lost a brace of kinsmen. All are punished"; 5.3.292-5, my emphasis). The theme of the ruler's too lenient attitude towards the law and its application significantly recurs in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, where Vincentio, the Duke, admits that "We have

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[11]   For a more detailed discussion on this point, see Bigliazzi and Nigri 2016.

strict statutes and most biting laws, | The needful bits and curbs to headstrong jades, | Which for this fourteen years we have let slip" (1.3.19-21). In *Romeo and Juliet*, however, the Prince's guilt is equalled by the Friar's culpability and ambition of wanting to "meddl[e] in Verona's partisan and political affairs", as Weinberger points out (2003: 361).

Thus the final act of *Romeo and Juliet* focuses, on the one hand, on the experience of grief and loss that enters a private-public dimension of mourning confined within a dedicated commemorative space; on the other hand, on the private experience of the two lovers' tragic death that is finally crystallized into a dimension open to public gaze with the two statues of pure gold enduringly bonding their names and their love with that of their city, whose name is ultimately culturally re-semiotized, now standing for Romeo and Juliet's "story of […] woe" and love (5.3.309).

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