STUDIEN ZUR GERMANISTIK UND ANGLISTIK
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Love, Death, and Fortune

Central Concepts in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

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EDITION

2 The concept of love

2.1 The Rosaline episode: The tradition of courtly love, anti-Petrarchism, and its ideological relevance

To understand the core concept of *Romeo and Juliet*, the genesis of the concept of Renaissance love in Western Europe has to be sketched. Among its most immediate predecessors and influences are ancient erotic texts, the troubadour tradition which originated in Southern France and exerted a lasting influence from the 12th to the 14th century, the medieval Minnesang and courtly service, Petrarchan love poetry, the neo-Platonic theories of the Florentine Academy and the conventions of sonneteering. Whether the relationship between *Romeo and Juliet* may justly be called a romantic love relationship will be discussed separately (cf. chapter 6).

The concept of love as it is presented by a number of characters in *Romeo and Juliet*, and not only by the protagonists, is a diversified and complex phenomenon. Among other influences, its articulation in the play is influenced by the obsolete, yet still persistent, tradition of *amour courtois* with its literary conventions and socio-cultural heritage. However, courtly love is also presented as an outdated ideal which is gradually, and ever more forcefully at the end of the 16th century, displaced by the concept of worldly love.[1] This change of paradigm results from a change in the stratification of society around 1600 which is accompanied by a decreasing influence of the ethics of Christian humanism that had supported the tradition of the courtly love concept. In *Romeo and Juliet* both love concepts, the courtly and the worldly, co-exist.[2]

In *Romeo and Juliet* motifs and rhetorical means are employed to describe the pathos of love in a way which is unequalled in the dramatic canon of the English Renaissance.[3] These means originate in sonneteering, which is the true

1 Weiß 1979, 158.
2 Brodwin 1972, xi–xii.
3 Leimberg 1968, 13–14.

love poetry in Elizabethan England. The specific form of Italian sonnets was shaped by Dante, Guinicelli and Cavalcanti, the most prominent representatives of the *dolce stil nuovo* ("sweet new style").[4] The erotic and religious elevation of the lady which forms an integral part of Petrarchism soon develops into a popular cliché. Especially Petrarch's *Canzoniere* is taken as a literary model by Renaissance writers. Because they admire its perfection, they use it as a means of æsthetic orientation, and a quarry of ideas and textual expressiveness. Pleasant as this may be, it sometimes has detrimental effects all the same. The *Canzoniere* sonnet cycles and individual poems are written in the sonnet form, each of which comprises 14 lines in the rhyme scheme *abbaabba cdecde* or *cdcdcd*. When imitated or repeated too often, the exaggerated idealisation of the woman and the rigid style and form easily result in an altogether "forced" impression that lacks the appeal of authentic individuality and genuine creativity.[5] At the beginning of the 16th century the Italian ("Petrarchan") Sonnet is imported to the English court of Henry VIII by Sir Thomas Wyatt and Sir Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. The English poets transform the literary antecedent, lending it a new structure. The rhyme scheme of the popular Spenser Sonnet (*abab cdcd ee*) can easily be distinguished from that of the "Shakespeare Sonnet" introduced by the Earl of Surrey (*abab cdcd efef gg*).[6] The formal structure, the characteristic metaphors of preciousness, the *concetti* (conceits)[7], and the sophisticated Petrarchan tropes are adopted, modified and refined by English poets.[8] In England, the popularity of the lyrical form of the sonnet is particularly enhanced by two sonnet cycles, namely Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595) and

4 Schabert 1992, 646.

5 Cuddon 1992, 895–96.

6 Cuddon 1992, 895.

7 Cuddon exemplifies: "As a literary term this word has come to denote a fairly elaborate figurative device of a fanciful kind which often incorporates metaphor, simile, hyperbole or oxymoron and which is intended to surprise and delight by its wit and ingenuity. [...] The sonneteering conceits are the commonest. These tend to be decorative, and the writers of love sonnets had a large number of conventional conceits [...]. The origin of the majority of them is Cupid's analysis of the lover's complaints and maladies in *The Romaunt of the Rose* [...]. In a jealousy conceit a lover wishes he were an ornament, article of clothing or creature of his mistress so that he might be much closer to her. [...] [Another] type is what may be called the carpe diem conceit: the appeal to the mistress not to delay loving because beauty fades and time is a devourer. [...] Yet another kind is that which [...] has been called 'pastoral hyperbole' and commonly expresses the view that the loved one has a powerful effect on the natural order [...]" (Cuddon 1992, 177 ff.).

8 Schabert 1992, 646.

Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1591). And undoubtedly, there are several 16th century authors who follow a strict set of rules in their writing as favoured by the tastes of those who shape the predominant formal mores and modes of artistic expression, that is an aristocratic minority with enough money and influence to afford patronage.[9] As mannerisms had become the socially and artistically sanctioned fashion of the day, much of late Elizabethan writing gives evidence of this kind of stale, stylised and often lifeless art(ificiality).

When Romeo enters the stage for the first time in act I, scene 3, the topos of love is established as a contrast to the vulgar equation of love with sex in the opening scene as well as to the death topos.[10] Romeo here represents Heywood's character type of the *lover not loved*.[11] The often ridiculed cliché of the melancholic lover is well-known to Elizabethan playgoers. It is frequently exaggerated beyond measure by rendering the sufferer a laughing stock, as for example in *Twelfth Night* (Count Orsino). Bearing this in mind, the young man's skilful and wordy yearning for Rosaline's love at first seems to prepare the ground for a comedy, even more so because his alleged *Weltschmerz* is easily unmasked as the complacent and rather trite posing of a half-baked teenage nobleman.

Because of its undertone of inauthenticity, Romeo's love confession is soon revealed as a mere lip service paid to a(n in)comprehending listener, rather than an authentic revelation of his feelings. Despite his slightly unnerving loquaciousness which revolves around his love and suffering, the personal element or the individualising aspect of the "real" Romeo remains inaccessibly concealed.[12] Likewise the protagonist's description of the beloved woman is strangely faceless and shapeless. It becomes obvious that Rosaline as she actually exists is of secondary importance. Romeo's wails are but an expression of the narcissistic self-observation of a fashionably lovesick poser. At first he even keeps her name secret from Benvolio and pretends to be too modest, too painstricken or too much involved in the strictly isolating microcosm of the suffering lover to tell his friend about her although his confidant might offer consolation. Romeo's refusal seems even more ridiculous as he hardly seems willing to talk about

9 Rohrsen 1976, 2.
10 Leimberg 1968, 131.
11 John Heywood (1497–1580) uses names like "Lover beloved", "No(ther) lover nor loved" and "Beloved, not loving" in his plays *A Dialogue on Wit* and *Folly and A Play of Love*. As Mullini points out, the character types can be traced in Ficino. Cf. Mullini 2000, 114.
12 Leimberg 1968, 131.

anything else except his unhappy love and directs everybody around him more or less explicitly to ask him about his "unfortunate condition". His ridiculous affectation reaches its climax when his friend asks: "Tell me in sadness who is that you love?" (I, 1, 197), and after playing prim and hard-to-get, he replies: "In sadness, cousin, I do love a woman." (I, 1, 202). Romeo's pathetic lament falls flat in its turgidity and pompousness. What remains is cold, unemotional stiltedness.

Even Romeo's first lines after having entered the stage signify that he does everything in loving according to the rulebook of poetry (Rom.: "Alas that love whose view [. . .] This love feel I, that feel no love in this." I, 1, 169–179). His first twelve lines, which consist of ten syllables each and are all written in the iambic pentametre of blank verse, formally approach the sonnet. The subsequent sections of Romeo's rhetorical "individuation" may be taken to refer to the traditional sonnet types in terms of content (*amorous ague, quid amor, chastity topos, procreation motif, blazon*) as well as length.[13] At first variations of the amorous ague and the quid amor topos are elaborated upon by the young Veronese (Rom.: "O me! What fray was here? / Yet tell me not, for I have heard it all. / Here's much to do with hate, but more with love. / Why then, O brawling love, O loving hate, / O anything of nothing first create! / O heavy lightness, serious vanity, / Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms! / Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health, / Still-waking sleep that is not what it is! / This love feel I that feel no love in this." I, 1, 171–180). When his words fail to have the desired effect on Benvolio, Romeo exclaims with indignation: "Dost thou not laugh?" (I, 1, 181) which sounds more like a request than a complaint.

Next, Shakespeare makes use of the chastity topos which is a standard in the Renaissance praise of the beloved female (Rom.: "She'll not be hit / With Cupid's arrow, she hath Dian's wit, / And in strong proof of chastity well arm'd / From love's weak childish bow she lives uncharm'd.[14] / She will not stay the siege of loving terms / Nor bide th'encounter of assailing eyes / Nor ope her lap to saint-seducing gold; / O she is rich in beauty, only poor / That when she dies, with beauty dies her store." / Ben.: "Then she hath sworn to live chaste?" / "She hath, and in that sparing makes huge waste." I, 1, 206–216). In his

13 Leimberg 1968, 131–32.

14 In different editions of the text the versions "unharm'd" and "uncharm'd" co-exist which both make sense.

eulogy and lamentation regarding Rosaline's sexual abstinence Romeo employs mythological comparisons and the metaphor of the phallic love arrow. Yet no matter how outspoken Romeo's criticism is, it only goes to illustrate the infatuation of the lover and the unearthly perfection of his *madonna angelicata*: "She is too fair, too wise, wisely too fair, / To merit bliss by making me despair. / She hath forsworn to love, and in that vow / Do I live dead that live to tell it now." (Rom., I, 1, 206–9). In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the significance and the symbolic import of virginity in the context of Renaissance England the peculiar panegyric of the *Virgin Queen* ought to be taken into consideration.

According to the calocagathic ideal, praising a woman's outward beauty is simultaneously and by necessity a praise of her virtue or inner beauty.[15] Of all virtues, chastity is considered most important.[16] The connection between sensually perceptible beauty and the "hidden" beauty of the mind and soul is imperative. As Rohrsen mentions: "Für die Petrarkisten bildet die Einheit von Tugend und Schönheit bekanntlich ein Zentralthema."[17] The neo-Platonic philosophy of love is rooted in Plato's idea of the good and the beautiful.[18] Singer explains the significance of beauty in neo-Platonism: "For Ficino, [...] a proper love of things and persons in the world is *itself* a love for God. The Christian goal on earth now becomes the ability to love 'God in everything'. [...] Beginning with Plato and continuing throughout the eros tradition, the concept of beauty provides a focus to all theorizing about love. [...] the philosophy of Ficino

15 Rohrsen 1976, 79.

16 Rohrsen 1976, 81.

17 Rohrsen 1976, 79 (my translation: "For Petrarchan writers the unity of virtue and beauty forms a central topos, as is generally known [...]".) As Rohrsen points out, the origins of this concept lie in the formulæ *bellezza ed onestà* which Petrarch mainly adopted from the troubadours and the poets of the *dolce stil nuovo*.

18 "Since Plato believes that everything — not just man — strives for the attainment of some good, the entire universe would seem to be continuously in love. [...] But [...] few of them recognize the object of their love, that which motivates their striving, that which underlines their every desire. This supreme object [...] Plato calls *the Good*. He calls it absolute beauty. To the Greeks, beauty was a function of harmony. [...] This beauty is first of all eternal [...] next, it is not beautiful in part and ugly in part [...] nor again will this beauty appear to him like the beauty of a thought or a science, or like beauty which has its seat in something other than itself; [...] he will see it as absolute, existing alone with itself, unique, eternal, and all other beautiful things partaking of it, yet in such manner that while they come into being and pass away, it neither undergoes any increase or diminution nor suffers any change." (Singer 2009a, 54 and 56).

himself is pervasively optimistic about man's ability not only to enjoy beauty without undermining the love of God, but also to find God through a love of beauty."[19]

The procreation motif which Romeo addresses is part of the neo-Platonic topos of the immortalisation of a person in his or her child (Rom.: "For beauty starv'd with her severity / Cuts beauty off from all posterity." I, 1, 217/218). It expresses the speaker's sense of self-affirmation and also is a means of acknowledging the parents' own, if ephemeral, beauty.[20] Moreover, a fusion of motifs takes place in the Rosaline episode: The praise of Rosaline's beautiful eyes is brought in indirect and paradoxical connection with the glorious act of conception. Romeo maintains that if Rosaline gave in to his — or any other man's — "assailing eyes" (I, 1, 211), her invulnerable "fortress of chastity" would fall which would pave the way for sexual intercourse and thus the begetting of a descendant.

Rosaline's beauty and virtue are particularised in a *blazon*, a popular form of standardised praise of the beloved lady's beauty among Renaissance writers.[21] This kind of eulogy is to be numbered among the *catalogue verse*.[22] In the panegyric of the blazon, the physical features or "*perfections*" of a woman are desribed accurately and listed meticulously precise and in a prescribed order. It may well be assumed that Castiglione's concept of the ideal lady had little by little been rendered into a cliché due to the broad popular appeal of *Il Libro del Cortegiano*. In Romeo's impersonal and emotionally uninvolved praise of Rosaline Capulet, this very cliché resurfaces. The lover's use of language when he makes his first appearance on the stage scarcely exceeds the mechanical and blunt recital of a highly stylised catalogue or inventory of beauty and virtue assets desirable in a lady.

19 Singer 2009b, 167–68.

20 Taureck 1997, 16–17.

21 Cuddon states: "As a literary term it was used by he followers of Petrarchism to describe verses which dwelt upon and detailed the various parts of a woman's body; a sort of catalogue of her physical attributes [...] Almost inevitably the convention became a cliché and we find poets parodying this kind of conceit in the *contreblazon*." (Cuddon 1992, 97–98).

22 Cuddon explains: "The term describes a list of people, things, places or ideas. It is [...] found in many literatures. Sometimes its function has been didactic. In any event its usual object is to reinforce by elaboration." (Cuddon 1992, 123).

The Renaissance panegyric of beauty represents a meticulous system. The manner and order of praise are scrupulously specified: The beloved's physical features are lauded from top to bottom, i. e. from the lady's head to her toes. Furthermore the advantages of the front of her body are to be granted priority over her back.[23] The choice of body parts to be elaborated upon follows a kind of mental tally sheet.[24] Heightened attention is traditionally paid to the head, the face, and especially to the eyes. Even the imagery, the semantics, the metaphors of praise are predefined: Ideally, the lady's hair is golden, her high forehead is as milky white as alabaster, her full red lips which bespeak her tender years rival the red of corals, and her skin is divinely untarnished.[25] Her entire appearance is so perfect she seems nothing short of transcendent.

The ideal Renaissance lady exhibits a set of standard virtues (ethical qualities) and social advantages of which Romeo naturally attributes some to Rosaline: Among her moral virtues are chastity and prudence, patience, mildness and kindness.[26] The young man invokes this catalogue of physical and non-physical advantages with unerring certainty (Rom.: "strong proof of chastity [...] rich in beauty [...] too fair, too wise [...] exquisite" I, 1, 206–227). The social advantages, for example a wealthy family background, aristocratic descent, but also

23 A vivid example is given in Sir Philip Sidney's poem of 146 lines entitled *What Tongue Can Her Perfections Tell*: "What tongue can her perfections tell / In whose each part all pens may dwell? / Her hair fine threads of finest gold / In curled knots man's thought to hold; / But that her forehead says, 'in me / A whiter beauty you may see.' / Whiter indeed; more whiter than snow / Which on cold winter's face doth grow. / That doth present those even brows / Whose equal lines their angles bows, / Like to the moon when after change / Her horned head abroad doth range, / And arches be to heav'nly lids / Whose wink each bold attempt forbids. [...]" (Duncan Jones 2002, 134–37).

24 Rohrsen 1976, 71.

25 According to the Renaissance ideal of beauty, white skin — often the hand is referred to as pars-pro-toto — stands for the softness and freshness of a young woman's skin. It is also associated with innocence and chastity (Rohrsen 1976, 77–78). Rosaline's fair skin may also signify her noble descent, proving that she is in the privileged position of a noblewoman to stay indoors rather than expose herself to the sun to do physical labour. Priding oneself in a high forehead is part of the beauty ideal and may be witnessed in numerous contemporary depictions of aristocratic females like Antonio and Piero Del Pollaiuolo's profiles of women. To live up to the ideal, medieval women shaved their hairlines and hid them under hoods which resulted in a receding hairline and optically lengthened the forehead. In the Renaissance it became fashionable for ladies to show off their hair (Mendenhall 2011).

26 Rohrsen 1976, 79 ff.