

“This unbound lover”: Petrarchan parallels in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*

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Abstract:

This article examines Shakespeare’s configurations of Petrarchan love in his play *Romeo and Juliet* (1595) in relation to Petrarch’s thematic resurgence in Renaissance literature. This work argues that while Shakespeare’s text employs the theatrical medium to critique conventions of Petrarchan love, his writing also attempts to transform and redefine Petrarchism in order to add more dimension to its representation in Renaissance literature. The play demonstrates the transformative potential of Petrarchism through primary and secondary characterisation, firstly by casting secondary characters as figures critical of Petrarchan conventionality, then secondly by depicting how primary characters attempt to subvert the limitations of Petrarchan artifice, ultimately reconfiguring the parameters of Petrarchism altogether.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Petrarch, transformation, Renaissance, *Romeo and Juliet*

Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* (1595) incorporates distinctively Petrarchan notions of unattainable and unrequited love in order to illustrate distance between beloved object and lover, as well as the consuming despair of unreciprocated desire. It is commonly believed that the antithetical nature of Petrarchism is critiqued by Shakespeare's poetics in *Romeo and Juliet*, as the play frames Petrarchan love as archaic, occasionally hyperbolic, and ultimately doomed to the machinations of fate. However, this essay explores the ways in which Shakespeare's text functions as both a critique of Petrarchism, as well as its elevation of Petrarchism beyond a "static" (Dasenbrock, 1985, p.38) representation, by analysing Shakespeare's approach to primary character development and his positioning of secondary characters as critical figures. The play ensures that the lover, Romeo, and his beloved, Juliet, transcend the limitations of Petrarchan narrative, while crediting Petrarchism's role in highlighting the unique and transformative nature of love and desire.

Dasenbrock describes Petrarchan love as a "system" which originated from a method of writing love poetry that drew from, but didn't explicitly identify with, Petrarch's poems to his distant and pseudonymous muse, "Laura" in his *Rime*. English Renaissance poetry, particularly the work of Edmund Spenser, appropriated Petrarchan themes of unrequited love and desire in a way which regenerated the trope, distancing its thematic similarities to medieval courtly love through the use of figures who demonstrated more self-reflexivity than was characteristic of the "monumental egoism", or extreme self-consciousness, associated with Petrarch (Dasenbrock, 1985, p.38). One such work by Spenser, which I will briefly discuss, illustrates the era's modification of the "radical stasis of the medieval personality" (Dasenbrock, 1985, p.38), which Petrarch himself had attempted to challenge through his poetry's introspective condemnation regarding "the lack of continuity in his

[Petrarch's] tangled passions" and "the distractions of his cluttered motives" (Dasenbrock, 1985, p. 38).

As the pitfalls of distant and unconsummated love were chronicled in a new artistic era, the ways in which such love was dissected, analysed and commented upon, changed, indicated by a key stylistic technique. Poetry which replicated the Petrarchan system became focalised by not only one speaker, but incorporated multiple characters, which helped the reader identify the fallacies inherent in the pursuit of a cold and distant star (the beloved object). Spenser's Sonnet 75 in *Amoretti* is a key example which offers a detailed insight into how the shift from Petrarchan egoism was mitigated by the inclusion of a fictional critic within the work, whose purpose was to provide commentary on the actions of the determined, yet hopeless, lover, who also functioned as the poem's speaker.

As Spenser describes his sonnet's speaker watch as the "tyde...made my paynes his pray", there appears another figure, a woman, who has herself been observing the pains of her persistent admirer. She chides him ("vayne man") and immediately identifies the main culprit of the character's woes: the egoist model of romantic folly introduced by Petrarch. She then continues: "For I my selve shall lyke to this decay/ and eek my name bee wyped out lykewize." The commentary of a secondary figure within Spenser's poetry indicates the more complex and perceptive nature of literary introspection which emerged within the Renaissance. The speaker's female critic, is, ultimately, himself, with the added acknowledgement that the discontinuity of his own desires reflects the hitherto unacknowledged realisation that the object of his love also lacks continuity; that is, permanency. The realisation of not only one's own mortality, but the mortality and discontinued existence of another, suggests emotional development beyond the limited walls of self-consciousness. The speaker's consciousness of another individual's mortality

suggests a key awareness of inevitable externalities, particularly the recognition of the magnitude and power of unstoppable forces such as death.

Recognition of not only one's own existence, but the threatened existence of another is one method through which Spenser's sonnet denoted a change in literary configurations of Petrarchism during the Renaissance. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* features supporting characters which pathologise Romeo's infatuation as a fleeting sensation, much like a brief, but life-threatening, illness. Their commentary, as well as the prevalent "love-as-sickness" metaphor which appears recurrently in the play, demonstrates how Shakespeare appropriates Petrarchan egoism to create self-reflexive commentary on the turbulent nature of unrequited passion.

In order to discuss how Shakespeare configures passionate love and its effects upon the lover and the beloved in *Romeo and Juliet*, we need to analyse in-text reactions to Romeo's role as a physical embodiment of Petrarchan desire. Romeo's actions are dissected by supporting characters, namely Benvolio and Mercutio, who function as critics of Petrarchan discourse, and expose the conventionality of Romeo's motivations.

Benvolio himself introduces Romeo, who is physically absent from much of Act One, Scene One, and attributes a 'love-sick' quality to his cousin, whom he spies underneath a grove of sycamore (1.1.114). Stephen Greenblatt, in his notes in *The Norton Shakespeare*, associates the grove with melancholy lovers who are "sick-amour" (Greenblatt, 1997, p.908), providing the earliest indicator of Romeo's romantic misfortune. Benvolio's description of Romeo's evasive, and seemingly cowardly behaviour as he flees from his kinsman, establishes Benvolio's role as a critic who chides Romeo's flightiness: "[I] gladly

shunned who gladly fled from me" (1.1.123). Benvolio's purpose in this scene is to critique the 'flighty', ephemeral nature of Petrarchan love, as demonstrated by its vessel, Romeo.

Romeo's embodiment of Petrarchism also incorporates aspects of momentary, yet profound grief, as exemplified by Lord Montague's description of his son, who, of late, has been seen with "tears augmenting the fresh morning's dew/ Adding to clouds more clouds with his deep sighs." (1.1.125). Fluid, including tears and black portentous bile (associated with "humours") (Greenblatt, 1997, p.909) accompany lines associated with love's distance; that is, the physical separation between the beloved and the lover. The fluids have sexual allusions, symbolising the enervating nature of unrequited and therefore, unconsummated love. Romeo's desire for Rosaline is misspent, misdirected energy, which Montague hopes "good counsel may the cause remove." (1.1.135) Montague and Benvolio speak of Romeo's malady in pathological terms, and even Romeo refers to himself as a "sick man in sadness make his will, /A word ill urged to one that is so ill." (1.1.195) While Romeo's character shows some reflexivity by admitting his "illness", the pathological language which he and other characters employ reifies the problematic nature of Petrarchan desire in the Elizabethan world. As the roles of the play's fictional critics emphasise the disparity between Petrarchan and actualised (that is, requited and consummated) desire, they also help acknowledge, through their use of love-as-sickness metaphor, how love's progress is threatened by illness, decay, and ultimately, death.

The consequently fragile and ephemeral nature of Romeo's desire for Rosaline is characteristic of what Dasenbrock notes as Petrarchan poetry's "instability and discontinuity" (Dasenbrock, 1985, p.38), which is emphasised through fluctuations in the character's speech and temperament in Act One, Scene One. An especially pertinent example is Romeo's "O brawling love" speech, from lines 169 to 175. The piece exemplifies

the cluttered motives of the distant lover through its use of Petrarchan oxymorons, such as "bright smoke, cold fire, sick health" (1.1.173), helping reflect the illogicality of Romeo's predicament. His love is characterised by its distance from the object of desire, rather than proximity, and enabled through his idealisation of a character, Rosaline, who is physically absent from the play. Gayle Whittier calls Romeo's sonnet "misshapen [and] juvenile," observing that his linguistic excess "reveals emotional deficiency; perhaps his true confession comes last: 'I...feel no love in this.'" (Whittier, 1989, p.29) Whittier highlights the artifice behind Romeo's Petrarchan monologue, for it is just that: it is not dialogue with Rosaline. Rather, its expository style is directed at Benvolio, who does not engage with Romeo's entreaty: "Dost thou not laugh? / No, coz, I rather weep" (1.1.176). Benvolio appraises the sonnet as a symptom of "[...] thy good heart's oppression" (1.1.178), or an "affliction", as Stephen Greenblatt clarifies in *The Norton Shakespeare* (p.910). Again, Benvolio applies pathological language to what Romeo describes as 'love', indicating that its Petrarchan elements are the root of the malady itself.

Benvolio, as suggested by his name, is a rather benevolent critic of Romeo's actions. While he openly suggests the transferability of Romeo's romantic pretensions towards Rosaline by recommending that he "Take [...] some new infection to thy eye" (1.2.45), he does not openly disparage the object of Romeo's love. Instead, Benvolio is critical of Romeo's flawed perception, whose senses have become plagued with the disease-like symptoms of unrelenting desire. The visual bias which dictates Romeo's love overrides healthy logic, indicated by Romeo's attraction to Rosaline who possesses "beauty starved by her severity" (1.2.212). Romeo's affliction; that is, his infatuation, corrupts his senses, particularly sight, leading to Benvolio's suggestion that Romeo "Compare her [Rosaline's]

face with some that I shall show/And you shall think thy swan a crow.” (1.3.86). Benvolio’s advice demonstrates his jaded familiarity with Petrarchan trope, and his words become prophetic during Lord Capulet’s feast when Romeo immediately shirks his affection for Rosaline, effectively labelling her a “crow”, in favour of Juliet: “So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows/ As yonder lady o’er her fellows shows” (1.5.45). Benvolio demonstrates knowledge of the “book” which Romeo derives his language of love, highlighting the predictable course of Petrarchan desire.

Benvolio critiques Petrarchism in order to address and rectify the disparity between Romeo’s senses and conscience; in short, his character’s purpose is to realign the individual, and correct the sickly and “misshapen” (Whittier, 1989, p.29) desire which Romeo embodies. Mercutio, on the other hand, dissects the distortive nature of Petrarchism, and his incisive critique is set apart from Benvolio’s guidance by the former’s acerbic language. Where Benvolio barely touches upon Rosaline’s character, Mercutio provides the most illustrative passage about her, succeeding Romeo’s descriptive and somewhat dissociative efforts in Act One, Scene One. Mercutio conjures Rosaline’s physical presence by listing her “bright eyes [...], scarlet lip” (2.1.17) and then more explicitly, her “fine foot, straight leg and quivering thigh” (2.1.19), rejecting Romeo’s sacralised rhetoric regarding his “chaste” saint (1.1.203). Mercutio’s description undermines Petrarchism’s spiritual elevation of the beloved figure, and produces a woman of flesh, the target of Romeo’s profane lust and blind Cupid’s arrow. Mercutio does not represent the unification of Rosaline’s material existence and Romeo’s idealisation; rather, his language thwarts Romeo’s desire for reciprocation and consummation with the beloved. Mercutio produces a dismembered account of the beloved’s individual parts, which Whittier observes, “intended to reclaim Romeo to himself and the "real" world, [and] exposes a poetry that has forgotten the flesh” (Whittier, 1989,

p.34). Indeed, Romeo's Petrarchan lyricism in Act One, Scene 1, describes Rosaline through vaporous terms such as "fair", and asserts that she is "rich in beauty" (1.1.200-208), which propels Mercutio's call for flesh in Act 2, Scene Four: "O flesh, flesh, how art thou fishified!" (2.4.34). Here, Shakespeare describes how Romeo's physical emaciation is propelled through his desire for a physically intangible muse, and satirises his infatuation through Mercutio, who archly compares Rosaline to Petrarch's lost muse Laura: "Laura to his lady was a kitchen wench" (2.4.35) Mercutio, like Benvolio, objectively critiques Petrarchism's shadow upon Romeo's romantic discourse, and as David Laird succinctly observes: "[Critics] are inclined to echo Mercutio's impatience with the idealisation of romantic love and its patterned articulation" (Laird, 1964, p.204).

While the roles of Mercutio and Benvolio serve to critique the Petrarchan system's trope-like consistency through Romeo's "patterned articulation" (such as his rote recitation of flattery and love verses in Juliet's presence), Juliet's characterisation demonstrates how Petrarchan desire is capable of inversion and transformation, through her interaction with Romeo. Her methods of critique differ from Benvolio and Mercutio's disengagement from Petrarchan rhetoric, Laird noting: "When love is war, Mercutio refuses to fight: 'I'll to my truckle-bed; / This field bed is too cold for me to sleep.'" (Laird, 1964, p.204) Juliet, on the other hand, comes face-to-face with her enemy (by name alone), Romeo, signalling how Shakespeare signals Petrarchism's shift from separation to unity through their meeting in Act One, Scene Five.

In accordance with Petrarchism's 'love as religion' metaphor, involving the sacralisation and elevation of the beloved object beyond mere earthly admiration, Romeo approaches Juliet with the demeanour of a pilgrim approaching a saint. Reflective of works

which appropriated 'Pilgrim's Progress' narratives, such as Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Romeo's gravitation towards Juliet signals his 'enlightenment'; that is, his progression from mere Petrarchan embodiment, to fully-realised character. Juliet enables this transformation by breaking down the most prohibitive barrier of Petrarchism, distance, by urging Romeo to touch her: "Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much/ Which mannerly devotion shows in this/ For saints have hands that pilgrims do touch/ And palm to palm is holy palmer's kiss" (1.5.95) While Juliet's desire for physical interaction can be read as a rejection of Petrarchism, her speech still indicates her 'sacred' status. She wilfully enters into dialogue with Romeo by conversing in his, and thereby, Petrarch's language of love, and notes that his kiss is reflective of Petrarchan conventionality: "You kiss by th'book" (1.5.106). Similarly, Romeo encounters Juliet only through Petrarchan device; he is lured to the ball by Rosaline's presence, and though he transfers his affections to Juliet, she too is initially a 'strange' or distant figure, Romeo referring to her as "Yonder lady" in line 46 of Act One, Scene Five.

Dasenbrock's Spenserian interpretation of Petrarch's 'Lady' assists in analysing how Juliet diverges from the Petrarchan mould of femininity:

The Lady, of course, never changes at all, at least in the sense that she never allows the poet to satisfy his desires. But her inflexibility reinforces the protean and unstable character of Petrarchan love. First, it means that the love situation is never resolved but must go on and on, endlessly, as long as the poet continues to love and write poems about that love. Second, what he writes about, in the absence of any change in the Lady, is the change in his attitude toward her. (Dasenbrock, 1985, p.38)

Spenser's representation of Petrarch's 'Lady' figure, particularly her benevolent critique of her admirer's tenacity, can also be said to provoke a 'change in attitude' from the speaker. However, this change is not portrayed through eventual despondency, recalling the

self-conscious egoism of Petrarch's Cazoniere, and its recollections of "vain hopes and vain sorrows" (le vane speranze e 'l van dolore) (Mortimer, 2002, p.44). Shakespeare subverts the static, unresolved nature of Petrarchan love by ensuring the continuation of Romeo and Juliet's mutual romance, up until the moment of their deaths.

A factor which enables love's progression is Juliet's unwillingness to remain "strange," which she attributes to unsavoury "cunning", or artifice, in Act Two, Scene One (2.1.144). She is prepared to give Romeo her maidenhood (virginity) if he will agree to marriage, thereby eliminating all distance between them. Carolyn E. Brown describes how the transformative power of desire involves "Romeo subsuming his identity into Juliet's" (Brown, 1996, p.341), thereby making them "one flesh". As Juliet also calls upon Romeo to "doff thy name/And for thy name – which is no part of thee - take all myself." (2.1.89-91), their metamorphosis into one identity is complete, as the 'rebirth' of both characters reconfigures the parameters of Petrarchism.

By virtue of its transformation by matrimony and consummation, Petrarchism, formerly characterised by its erratic and unstable nature, now maintains its continuity as the play's 'norm'; it becomes a site where love is (however briefly) enjoyed rather than endured. A particular example sees Juliet refashioning Mercutio's 'dismemberment' of Rosaline in Act Three, Scene Two. Juliet's wish for Romeo to be "cut [...] out in little stars" (3.2.22) replicates and subverts Petrarchan lyric, as it transports Romeo to the heavens, ensuring his eyes and not the "two sweet habitual stars" (i duo mei dolci usati segni) (Mortimer, 2002, p. 117) of Petrarch's inscrutable lady, are her guiding muse. As Petrarchism becomes sanctioned by the play, however, any disturbance to its sacred love is removed, or destroyed. Mercutio, erstwhile critic of Petrarchan desire is dispatched by

Tybalt, who is duly slain by Romeo. The death of Tybalt, the play's human incarnation of feuding and disruption, demonstrates the repercussions of defying the potentially stabilising force of the Capulet/Montague union upon the streets of Verona.

Romeo and Juliet's own deaths can be said to reify the "destructive potential" ([Headlam-Wells, 1998](#), p.932) of Petrarchism. However, Laird suggests that Juliet's grave is "an end and a beginning", as Romeo's comparison of it to a "womb of death" (5.3.45) signifies the renewal of harmony to the streets of Verona. Romeo and Juliet become immortalised, somewhat ironically, through art, and their love is immortalised by their statues "in pure gold" which lay side by side (5.3.303-304) in the streets of Verona.

The preservation of the beloved through art echoes Spenser's *Amoretti*, particularly Sonnet 75, in which both the poet claims: "Our love shall live, and later life renew" ([Greenblatt, 1997](#), p. 906). Shakespeare's appropriation of the Petrarchan model further highlights how the acknowledgement of death transforms the parameters of Petrarchan egoism. In Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, for example, his speaker acknowledges that "rough winds do shake the darling buds of May/And summer's lease hath all too short a date", indicating that earthly bliss is ultimately short-lived. Shakespeare's appropriation of Petrarchan discourse reveals the speaker's wish that his beloved should become immortalised through his literary portrayal in the seemingly stout assurance in the line: "But thy eternal summer shall not fade." Compared alongside Spenser's poem, particularly the line, "my verse your vertues rare shall eternize" in Sonnet 75, Shakespeare's appropriation of Petrarchism provided a literary representation of love in *Romeo and Juliet* which remains transformative and enduring.

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