

ELEMENTS OF NEO-PLATONISM IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S  
*ROMEO AND JULIET*

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The tendency to ignore the presence of Neo-Platonic elements in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is evident in the critical writings on the play. Most of the scholars, instead, either agree to the point that *Romeo and Juliet* are the representatives of Elizabethan romanticism or simply identify romantic love with courtly love without defining the former (Traversi 1968:123). In addition, scholars like Leonor Leet Brodwin (1971) regard the love of *Romeo and Juliet* as an example of courtly love in its strict sense.

Our assumption is that although the love of the protagonists is presented in a conventional manner at the beginning of the play and the features of courtly love appear in the behaviour and language of the lovers, it evolves into a sublime feeling comparable even with the divine love of Neo-Platonism. However, before any such claim can be attempted it is necessary to make a clear statement of what is understood here by Neo-Platonism, since the term often causes misapprehension.

A philosophical system reconciling the divine and the human order in the way similar to that of Plato was established in the Platonic Academy of Florence founded by Lorenzo de' Medici in 1470. The central figure and at the same time the man in charge of the Platonic Academy was Marsilio Ficino (1433—1499). Ficino's Neo-Platonism comprising theology and philosophy made an attempt to resolve the opposition between Platonism and Christianity or, in more general terms, between the earthly and the divine.

The universe appeared to Ficino as divided into the material world and the immaterial world beyond the orbit of the Moon, the place of immortal and ideal love and beauty. On the other hand, the material world, according to Ficino, consisted of vivid nature full of beauty and divine influence, and of coarse, shapeless matter. Since these extremes were said to stay in constant conflicts, Neo-Platonists viewed the material world as a place of struggle between ugliness and beauty, happiness and misery. The material world seemed

to replace Hell, for there was no such a sphere in the Neo-Platonic concept of the universe (Jayne 1944:26).

Ficino achieved the reconciliation between Platonism and Christian thought as well as between the earthly and the divine through the doctrine of love, and though, paradoxically, dualism never disappeared from Neo-Platonism, Ficino's concepts of love and beauty brought it into harmony.

Divine kindness revealed in beauty encompasses the whole universe but, according to Neo-Platonists, in two forms symbolized by two figures of Venus or the "twin Venuses" mentioned already in Plato's *Symposium*, (Ficino 1944:142). Divine Venus or *Venus Coelestis* was associated with the immaterial domain and symbolized beauty equal with the original, comprising everything, magnificence of God (Panofsky 1971:195). *Venus Vulgaris* or Earthly Venus symbolized the eternal beauty realized in the material world. She gave life and shape to the elements of nature and in this way made it comprehensible to our senses (Panofsky 1939:142).

Furthermore, Ficino claimed that since every form of beauty delivered a corresponding form of love, each Venus was accompanied by her son, Amor. Although *Venus Coelestis* together with *Amor Divinus* i.e. the divine love and *Venus Vulgaris* together with *Amor Vulgaris* (the earthly love) led to the realization and creation of beauty, there existed a difference of values between them. The divine, contemplative form of love through the visual and the particular reached the intelligible and the universal, whereas the natural form of love achieved self-fulfillment only in the visual sphere (Panofsky 1971:194). The divine love could be attained only through visual experience leading to apprehension of the universal beauty. Contrarywise, the visual form of beauty was the way to the "human" affection. And those of us who did not care for the visual beauty, or who preferred lust and pleasure to contemplation faced the bestial love, as another Neo-Platonist, Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), named the uncontrolled desire (Panofsky 1971:194).

Interestingly, the influence of Neo-Platonic movement on art brought a new image of Anteros, the god of reciprocated love (Panofsky 1971:307–308). In the ancient Greece he was presented as fighting for the palm with his brother Eros. In Renaissance, due to Neo-Platonism, Anteros personified the divine, rational and chaste love contrasted with the sensual, vulgar passion. Hence, Anteros identified with *Amor Divinus*, the son of *Venus Coelestis*, was in opposition to *Amor Vulgaris*. The latter was often presented as blind or blindfolded. The blindness of Amor became significant to the degree that by removing or adding the bandage Amor could personify either the divine love or illicit sensuality (Panofsky 1939:112).

The distinction between the divine and the earthly, between the spiritual and the material, the pure and the vulgar is constant and consistent in the philosophical system of Ficino and his friends grouped in the Platonic Aca-

demy of Florence. Peculiarly, in *Romeo and Juliet* this distinction is underlined as well, just to mention the realistic and sometimes even vulgar approach to love as represented by Mercutio and Nurse which is juxtaposed with the love of the protagonists.

Obviously, we cannot name Shakespeare the heir of Neo-Platonists, yet he dealt with the ideas of love and beauty in his poems and plays. Beauty and love were main currents streaming into England from Italy and a wide range of Elizabethan writers was influenced by them. Ficino's leading ideas were condensed into a poem *Cannzona dello Amore Celeste et Divino* by Giordano Benivieni. This poem published together with Pico della Mirandola's commentary was familiar to Spenser whose works belonged to Shakespeare's sources (Vyvyan 1961:34). John Vyvyan (1961:34) claims that Shakespeare may have read the *Hymne in Honour of Beauty* as well as some of Ficino's Latin translations of Plato and Plotinus. There is also a probability that both Spenser and Shakespeare were the readers of Castiglione's *The Book of Courtier*, the "handbook" of kinds of love (Vyvyan 1961:52). Therefore, one could risk a statement that Shakespeare was familiar at least with the fundamental assumptions of Neo-Platonism and made use of them in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Idealism in *Romeo and Juliet* is revealed in the conventional concept of love but, one has to admit, to a certain degree only. We must keep in mind that courtly love represented by Romeo's affection to Rosaline and at an early stage to Juliet is parodied in the play. Idealism appears first of all in the poetic vision of love in which Shakespeare, next to the physical vitality of the lovers and to the elements of courtly love, demonstrated the Neo-Platonic view of love.

The first conversation of Romeo and Juliet at the ball is rendered in the tradition of Religion of Love and expressed in the form of a sonnet in which some religious motifs appear. (I, v, 92–109) Both Romeo and Juliet employ conceits and religious images like "pilgrim", "saints", "holy shrine", "sin", "devotion", "holy palmers", "prayer", "faith". However, these images so characteristic for religious rhetoric do not derive only from the courtly love code but are also the result of Neo-Platonic reconciliation of the idealistic concept of love with Christian doctrine of love.

In turn, as John Vyvyan indicated, the religious terminology in the balcony scene (II, ii) e.g. "bright angel", "a winged messenger of heaven", "new baptis'd", "dear saint" belong both to the courtly love code and to Neo-Platonism (Vyvyan 1961:74).

The next element of Neo-Platonism that may be found in *Romeo and Juliet* is the presentation of Juliet as *Venus Coelestis*. To support this claim let us examine the passage from Act I, scene v, where Romeo sees Juliet for the first time.

"Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear.  
So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows  
As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows.  
The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand  
And touching hers, make blessed my rude hand.  
Did my heart love till now?  
Forswear it, sight.  
For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night."  
(I, v, 46-52)

As one can notice, Juliet appears to Romeo as an idea, an abstraction of beauty that has nothing in common with earth and reality. Like a white dove she is a symbol of chastity. She seems to be a divine creature whose power may bless Romeo. Finally, Juliet is called "true beauty", the Idea of Beauty, the purest form of it. Again, in the balcony scene Juliet appears to Romeo as a heavenly creature (II, ii, 20-22) and similarly, he being re-born in the name of divine beauty represents the god of love to 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".  
(II, ii, 113-115)

The image of blind Cupid appears several times in the text and it is appropriate to the Neo-Platonic distinction between illicit and chaste love, and illicit and sensual passion. In Juliet's soliloquy in Act III, scene ii, this distinction is also presented. Two images of Amor emerge from this passage. At this point it is worth while reminding Gary McCown's statement that the nickname "runaway" was attributed to Cupid, a great light-giver (McCown 1976:162-163). Hence, Juliet assumes that if Cupid has got eyes, he will wink them thus not giving light and preserving the secrecy of the nuptials (McCown 1976:162-163).

"Spread thy close curtain love-performing night  
That runaway's eyes may wink and Romeo  
Leap to these arms untalk'd-of and unseen".  
(III, ii, 5-7)

On the other hand, Juliet presents the image of blind Cupid that stresses her passionate thoughts when Romeo is to come.

"or, if love be blind,  
it best agrees with night".  
(III, ii, 9-10)

These two images of Amor demonstrate the influence of Neo-Platonism on Shakespeare's imagery. But the love of Romeo and Juliet resolves the problem of the Neo-Platonic dualism of love by the combination of the divine, the earthly and even the bestial in one poetic vision of love.

As it has been agreed upon, courtly love finds its roots in the Platonic tradition and in the Christian culture. The desire to unite with the Absolute comes directly from the Platonic ascent to the true beauty and love. Beginning with the beauties of earth and ascending to the highest Idea of Beauty was claimed by Plato to be the aim in life. The communion with the divine beauty free from mortality and ugliness of human life was understood as immortal existence (Brodwin 1971:16). Plato and his followers considered human existence to be the greatest evil; hence, the toil of living on earth replaced Hell lacking in the cosmic system of Ficino. Consequently, man had to endeavour suffering in order to transcend through an immortalizing communion with the divine (Brodwin 1971:16). The text of *Romeo and Juliet* reveals numerous examples of the above statement. The sea-voyage imagery in the play and Romeo's preoccupation with love indicate the presence of the motif of quest for the Absolute. The misfortune of the lovers exemplifies the misery of human life on earth. Finally, the relation of the attainment of the Absolute personified by Juliet to death enables us to state that the elements of Neo-Platonism are present in the play.

In Act I, scene iv, Romeo going to the ball in order to meet Rosaline is on his quest for an infinite love for which sake he is prepared to face death (Brodwin 1971:46-47).

"Romeo. I fear too early, for my mind misgives  
Some consequence yet hanging in the stars  
Shall bitterly begin his fearful date  
With this night's revels, and expire the term  
Of a despised life clos'd in my breast  
By some vile forfeit of untimely death".  
(I, iv, 105-110)

The image of Juliet's beauty in the balcony scene when juxtaposed with Romeo's premonition of death becomes significant. Romeo's approaching her in the Capulets' orchard can be treated as a symbol. Approaching the divine beauty that Juliet personifies or, in other words, "approaching love beyond the mortal condition is made by the way of danger and death" (Brodwin 1971:47). When banished, Romeo realizes that there is no life for him outside the walls of Verona since Juliet is not there.

"Romeo. There is no world without Verona walls  
But purgatory, torture, hell itself."  
(III, iii, 17-18)

Here Neo-Platonism comes to voice — the world without Juliet and her love means for Romeo suffering. Being banished, deprived of the influence of beauty he can do only one thing to unite with his beloved — die. Verona viewed from one side is the place of death and suffering, from another it is "Heaven".

"Heaven is here  
Where Juliet lives..."  
(III, iii, 29-30)

Although Romeo prefers death to the meaningless life on exile, he decided to commit suicide only when he learned of Juliet's "death". Whereas in Act III, scene iii death was interpreted by him as an identification of his love and infinite glory, in Act V, scene iii, he views death as a repulsive necessity to transcend and unite with Juliet (Brodwin 1971:59). Romeo reached the Absolute in the double sense: first, by loving Juliet and, second, by the fulfillment of his love in death ending his quest for the Infinite (Toliver 1965:238). Death is also repulsive to Juliet but when her lover is dead she dies "with a restorative" (V, iii, 16).

In brief, one has to admit that the major element of courtly love as the derivation from Neo-Platonism to be found in the relationship of Romeo and Juliet is their ennoblement through love that overcame death.

In Act V, scene i, Romeo reports his dream to Balthazar.

"I dreamt my lady came and found me dead-  
Strange dream that gives a dead man leave to think!  
And breath'd such life with kisses in my lips  
That I reviv'd and was an emperor."  
(V, i, 5-9)

This dream is a foretelling of the death of the lovers but it is also an evidence that the love of Romeo and Juliet was viewed as an immortalizing power, a power ennobling and raising man to the divine status. In the first place, the lovers replace the worship of God by the worship of each other (Muir 1973:100), which can be seen in the religious terminology they use and in the idealization of Juliet's beauty. In the second place, the divinity of their love is stressed by the fact that although they die, they win over the brutality and suffering of the terrestrial world not only through the attainment of the Absolute but also through their love that like a divine force transforms the world they lived in and brings back the harmonious order destroyed by the feud.

On the whole it may be said that Neo-Platonism intervenes throughout the play, giving the love of Romeo and Juliet a new dimension. The constant emphasis on the influence of stars on the lovers may derive from the Neo-Platonic approach to the cosmic order where planets affected human fate. The rendering of Verona as the place of feud, death, misfortune of the lovers indicates Shakespeare's familiarity with the Neo-Platonic views on the terrestrial, material world — the place of conflicting extremes and suffering. The images of love and beauty found in the text derive from Neo-Platonic division. Next, lust and lechery presented in the play can also be read as the image of bestial love, the concept invented by Neo-Platonists. Finally, the function of love and beauty as the forces restoring the natural order is inherent in Platonic thought.

The examination of the text of *Romeo and Juliet* (with the help of The Arden Shakespeare edition by Brian Gibbons published in London in 1980) allows us to state that Shakespeare was familiar with the ideas of Neo-Platonism and presented them in the play in the poetic vision of love.

THE ELEMENTS OF NEO-PLATONISM FOUND IN THE TEXT OF  
*ROMEO AND JULIET*

Neo-Platonism	Act I	Act II	The Text Act III	Act IV	Act V
Man and the universe	Prologue 7		iii, 17-18		i, 24
	i, 2 i, 177		v, 13-15		iii, 290-292
		iv, 106-111			iii, 304
Beauty	v, 46	ii, 20-22	iii, 29-30	i, 8	i, 6-9
	v, 51-52	ii, 26-32		v, 70	iii, 85-86 iii, 92-96
Love	i, 169-170	i, 12-13	ii, 6-10		i, 6-9
	iv, 4-5	ii, 50			
		ii, 65			
		ii, 80-81			
		ii, 113-114			
		iv, 16			
		v, 7-8			

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