

POSSIBLE ECHOES OF BOCCACCIO'S *DECAMERON*
IN THE BALCONY SCENE OF *ROMEO AND JULIET*

HENRYK ZBIERSKI

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

Most scholars seem to agree that among the basic 'dualities' in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, 'love' and 'lust' is not the least important one. It is hard to deny that in the dialogues and duologues between Romeo and Juliet, the ribald jests of the kind used by the Nurse and Mercutio seem to be eliminated. Indeed, among many other reasons which can be given for this, one can point out that it was natural for Shakespeare to wish to avoid anything in those dialogues and duologues that would militate against their poetic delicacy or would be conducive to vulgarity.

Juliet, and Romeo to a far more limited extent, are allowed their fair amount of bawdry, but from what we know at present, not in each other's company and even Juliet's frankness in the celebrated "Gallop apace" soliloquy, in spite of being characterized by elements of bawdry, is duly free from the cynical kind of bawdry of Mercutio or the vulgarity of the Nurse.

So, one thing to observe at the very beginning of this essay would be that the bawdry of the young lovers is to all intents different from that of the other characters.

The II.2 scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, traditionally called, or rather mis-called the 'balcony scene' (Cf. Hosley 1961: 141, note to line 51) contrary to the original stage directions, is undoubtedly one of the most celebrated purple pages in world literature, expressed in terms of supreme poetry. The particular romantic character of the balcony scene is enhanced in the cultural traditions of our country in that a passage from it was translated by Adam Mickiewicz and has been since established as part and parcel of his early poetry.

I discussed the differences in the attitudes of the Polish romantic poets to Shakespeare elsewhere (Zbierski 1960). The information presented above shows one of the many reasons why, in this country *Romeo and Juliet*, and particularly the balcony scene, by being firmly associated with particular traditional concepts of romanticism, is at the same time regarded as the epitome of the 'idealistic' approach in Shakespeare. Eric Partridge refers to it as follows: "In his general outlook and in his attitude towards sex and

towards bawdiness, he shows that he was both an idealist and a realist; a romantic and a cynic". (Partridge 1961: 4-5). The author of the present article made some effort to free himself from at least some elements of that 'romantic' tradition, both native and foreign, trying to see Shakespeare's romanticism in *Romeo and Juliet* as a romanticism with reservations (Zbierski 1966: 386). Moreover, when we shed some of the popular illusions by which we are prone to be influenced, ribaldry and romanticism need not be considered completely incompatible.

What is useful as a proper basis for an impartial discussion of a possibility of bawdy allusions and connotations in some of the images used by Shakespeare's young lovers in the balcony scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, is the realization of some basic truths like those aptly formulated by Richard Hosley, a scholar whose particular interest in the otherwise comparatively neglected play has been notable in recent years. He is free, at least, of sentimentality which in many other interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet* was a debased reflection of the play's 'romanticism' or of sheer old world moralizing, in all too many cases leading up to extolling the 'wisdom' of Friar Lawrence on the one hand, and to deploring the 'folly' or even 'immorality' of the young lovers on the other. I made some effort to explode the Friar Lawrence myth and thus to cast some new light upon the catastrophe of the play (Zbierski 1969) and this is what Richard Hosley states in connection with other problems on the general temper of the play: "Thus the 'true' love of Romeo and Juliet stands out sharply against a background of sensuality, Petrarchan affectation, and marriage-game conventionality. Romeo and Juliet are lovers in the tradition of romantic comedy, hence chaste. Romeo's 'bent of love' (II, ii, 143) is indeed honorable, and the Friar does not allow them to stay alone 'Till Holy Church incorporate two in one' (II, vi, 37). Nevertheless Shakespeare, without a trace of Mercutio's bawdry, reminds us that sex is a part of love: each of the lovers is losing a winning match, 'played for a pair of stainless maidenhoods' (III, ii, 13)". (Hosley 1965: 25). To the types of love in *Romeo and Juliet*, so aptly listed by Hosley, I should like to add yet another one: the traditional *amour courtois* or more strictly in this case, the 'religion of love' as presented by C. S. Lewis in his *Allegory of Love* (Lewis 1931). This is remarkably apparent in the lovers' first duologue (I. v. 95-112). As I pointed out (Zbierski 1966: 162) there are many words (one or two in each line) in that passage belonging to the vocabulary of the 'religion of love', such as: 'profane', 'holy shrine', 'sin', 'pilgrim(s)', 'devotion', 'saints', 'palms', 'pray', 'faith' and 'trespass', some of them repeated in a clever way. They convey the atmosphere and temper of a courtly flirtation with some encouragement on both sides and in keeping with the atmosphere of the time, place and circumstances: the first encounter of two sophisticated, Elizabethan-Italian young people falling in love during a formal ball. After all that, I wonder if

we should be surprised or not that to cap those highly elegant exchanges and two kisses Juliet says to Romeo: "You kiss by the book" (I. v. 112).

The question — by what book? — can hardly be avoided. There is an interesting explanation of the phrase in the glossary to the *New Shakespeare* edition of *Romeo and Juliet* (Dover Wilson 1963: 224),

"Book. (i) 'without book' = by rote; I. 2. 60; 'without-book' = recited by heart; I. 4. 7; (ii) 'by th' book' — O. E. D. gives 'formally, in set phrase', but prob. = according to a book of rules, as if you have learned prescribed rules from a textbook or breviary (cf. 3. I. 101, n); I. 5. 110".

The numbering of the *New Shakespeare* being somewhat different from the Globe numbering which I follow in my own quotations, the I. 5. 110 stands for Juliet's words. Consequently, apart from the here insignificant fact that the word 'book' in the phrase 'by the book' is perhaps the last link in the chain of the love religion vocabulary ('book' meaning here 'gospel' or 'breviary'), the words indicate not only Juliet's opinion of Romeo's skill in the art of kissing, but seem to show a lot of amorous boldness on the part of a girl. A similar instance is offered by Dover Wilson, this time on the part of Mercutio showing his grudging and pathetic admiration of Tybalt's swordsmanship ("... a villain that fights by the book of arithmetic!"). This again, bearing in mind that Juliet is definitely for all we know to be considered a young virgin, can only be accounted for in terms of some theoretical knowledge of the subject on her part, based on reading some kind of 'breviary' of *ars amatoria* or other. To emphasize this trait of her character too much would certainly be no greater a mistake than to disregard it, even if we remember that Charakterforschung has been suspect by a number of scholars.

This trait is particularly helpful in the interpretation of the following passage of the balcony scene presented in this essay,

Juliet. 'Tis almost morning. I would have thee gone,
And yet no farther than a wanton's bird,
That lets it hop a little from her hand,
Like a poor prisoner in his twisted gyves,
And with a silk thread plucks it back again,
So loving-jealous of his liberty.

Romeo. I would I were thy bird.

Juliet. Sweet, so would I;
Yet I should kill thee with much cherishing.
Goodnight, goodnight! Parting is such sweet sorrow,
That I shall say goodnight till it be morrow.

Romeo. Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace in thy breast!
Would I were sleep and peace, so sweet to rest!

[she goes in]

(text *New Shakespeare*, Globe numbering II, ii. 177 - 188, Clark 1900)

The 'bird' imagery in the above quoted passage seems to be perfectly 'innocent' at its face value and is taken as such by commentators. Neither

was it noted by Partridge's *Shakespeare's bawdy*. I was also unable to find any parallels indicating bawdiness in it in available literary and folklore material. At least, not in a similar situation.

However, a reader of Boccaccio's *Decameron* who remembers particularly well the story of *Novella Quarta, Giornata Quinta* of the *Decameron* cannot help suspecting some implied connotations of the 'bird' imagery of the above quoted passage of the balcony scene with the *leit-motive* of the novella in question, i.e. with the motive of 'nightingale' in the novella. That novella is characterized by a particularly strong insistence of the *leit-motive*, the recurrence of which is, as we know, the hall-mark of a typical short story proper or *conte*, in this case in its early form. The nightingale in its structural function plays a role similar to that of the 'falcon' in the other story of *Decameron* which is often cited in hand-books as a classical example of the short story proper and the recurrence of the *leit-motive* in it. The point I want to make here is that, owing to the insistence of the 'nightingale' *leit-motive*, it is difficult to imagine, apart from other points of interest, anyone who knows Boccaccio's *Decameron* and who at the same time does not remember the use Boccaccio makes of his ribald conceit on the 'nightingale'. To make the point, and the whole discussion of the subject of this essay clear, it is necessary to quote the relevant passages of Boccaccio's *Novella Quarta, Giornata Quinta*.

The young girl in the novella, Caterina, who wants secretly to meet Ricciardo Menardi, a young man she loves, to prevent his death from unrequited love, persuades her parents to let her sleep on a balcony. She uses two arguments: one is heat inside the house and the other is that she thus will be able to sleep better, because of the nightingale singing outside:

"Ripose la Caterina: Quando a mio padre et a voi piacesse, io farei volentieri fare un letticello in su 'l verone che è alto sua camera e sopra il suo giardino, e quivi mi dormirei, et udendo cantar el lusignuolo, et avendo il luogo più fresco, molto meglio starei che nella vostra camera no fo."

'Messer Lizio', the father of the girl at first refuses her request:

"Che rusignuolo è questo, a che ella vuol dormire? Io la farò ancora addormentare al canto delle cicale."

At last, by clever devices, Caterina obtains her father's permission:

„Via, fáccialevisi un letto tale quale egli vi cape, e fallo fasciar dattorno d'alcuna sargia, e dormavi, et oda cantar l'usignolo a suo senno."

What happens is best described in the following passages, all the time insisting on a ribald conceit on the 'nightingale':

„Ricciardo, come d'ogni parte senti le cose chete, collo ajuto d'una scala sali sopra un muro e poi d'in su quel muro appiccandosi a certe morse d'un altro muro, con gran fatica e pericolo, se caduto fosse, pervenne in su 'l verone, dove chetamente con gran-

dissima festa dalla giovane fu ricevuto; e dopo molti basci si coricorano insieme, e quasi per tutta la notte diletto e piacer presono l'un dell'altro molte volte facendo cantar l'usignolo. Et essendo le notti piccole et diletto grande, e già al giorno vicino (il che essi non credevano); e si ancora riscaldati e si dal tempo e si dallo scherzare, senza alcuna cosa addosso s' addormentarono, avendo la Caterina col destro braccio abbracciato sotto il collo Ricciardo, e colla sinistra mano presolo per quella cosa che voi tra gli uomini più vi vergognate di nominare."

Again the same ribald conceit is used when Lizio discovers the scene on the balcony in the morning. He says to his wife:

„Su tosto, donna, lievati e vieni a vedere, ché tua figliuola é stata si vaga del lusignolo che ella l'ha preso e tienlosi in mano" (Fanfani 1883: vol. II, 31 - 33)

The story has a happy ending with the marriage of the young couple who lived happily ever after.

A tentative theory that the discussed passage of the balcony scene has some kind of connection with the above presented novella of the *Decameron* is enhanced by the conclusion one may arrive at after a careful comparison of the Q_1 and Q_2 variants of that passage of *Romeo and Juliet*. At the very end of the scene, as if in a form of answer to Juliet's endearing and as we believe highly erotic words, Romeo says:

"Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace in thy breast!
Would I were sleep and peace, so sweet to rest!
[she goes in]"

(II. ii. 187, 188)

Romeo's substitution of himself for 'sleep' and 'peace' in the text established by standard editions of Shakespeare does not directly involve any idea of bawdry and one of the editors attributes these words not to Romeo but to Juliet (Hosley 1961: 43). However, among the several textual differences of that passage between Q_1 and Q_2 of *Romeo and Juliet* one is particularly striking in the light of our theory, namely the presence of the preposition 'on' instead of 'in' in the text of Q_1 .

"Rom. Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace on thy breast!"
(Q_1 II. ii. 159, Hubbard 1924: 60)

I hope it is needless to explain here the importance of this 'tremendous trifle' in the sense of the difference it makes to Romeo's intimate and anyway erotic substitution of himself for 'sleep' and 'peace' in the particular context. That would be a suggestive indication that the sophisticated allusion in Juliet's words was understood and answered in a similar way. And yet one might argue that two uncertain things do not yet make one certainty! However, let me point out that the words 'wanton' and 'cherish' used by Juliet in the same context have a double meaning long established by Partridge in his

Shakespeare's bawdy (1961: 87 and 217, 218 respectively), but not for the passage in question. The one as having "a sexual undertone" and the other as meaning "A light woman". And here the textual variants are curious enough to make one ponder: the 'wanton' in the discussed passage is a female in the Q₁ text and a male in the Q₂.

"Who lets it hop a little from her hand"
(Q₁, II. ii. 151, Hubbard 1924: 59)

and,

"That lets it hop a little from his hand"
(Q₂, II. ii. 178, Daniel 1875: 33)

Here most editors follow the Q₁ version, (Furness 1874: 109, Dowden 1917: 61, Kittredge 1941: 687 and Dover Wilson 1963: 37). The only available standard editions following the Q₂ variant are: Hosley 1961: 43 and Spencer 1967: 91.

I should perhaps argue that the Q₁ text shows a remarkable consistency in the treatment of both parts of the passage under discussion, but, of course, we are all conditioned if only to some extent, to mistrust the 'bad' quartos not only in this respect.

I hope, however, that the use of a quotation from Hardin Craig's book *A New Look at Shakespeare's Quartos* (Craig 1961) will not be regarded as an exercise in special pleading:

"The textual history of *Romeo and Juliet* presents typical features. (1) There is a first quarto (1597), a shortened stage version that has been acted in the provinces. It shows actors' modifications and corruptions, although the corruptions are by no means so great as recent scholars, anxious to establish a priori theories, have represented them to be. This is partly due to the fact that the first quarto was derived from the earliest known version of the play and not from either of the two later versions — the second quarto and the folio. (2) The second quarto (1599) was printed from the foul papers of Shakespeare's revision, not of the first quarto as it stands but from the original and yet uncorrupted form of the play before it went on the road. (3) The folio version (1623) was set up from the fair copy of Shakespeare's revision, which was the authorized playbook of the Lord Chamberlain's company. All three of these customary or necessary operations are denied by many modern scholars and editors, and since the nature and interrelations of the early texts are not understood, there is no certainty in the determination of the text of *Romeo and Juliet*. Every such text will of course have variorum features, but it is necessary to see what the variants are." (Craig 1961: 54)

And this is what Hardin Craig has to say on the scene discussed in this essay,

"The balcony scene offers a masterpiece of skillful cutting, and Cummings suggests that there is a tendency throughout Q₁ to lighten the part of Juliet. But whatever the motive, we again have shortening of Juliet's part with the omission of 11. 121 - 36. It results in the running together of two of Juliet's speeches and is a real feat of

abridgement, the cut being scarcely noticeable. An almost equally unobtrusive omission appears in 11. 149 - 55, where one can hardly tell that Romeo's speech is not an immediate reply to Juliet's shortened speech before. Another neat cut appears in the omission of five lines (9 - 14) from Friar Lawrence's soliloquy in the opening of scene iii. Their absence is not felt. This kind of abridgement continues throughout Q₁." (Craig 1961: 57)

Thus, at least according to Hardin Craig's re-interpretation of the 'bad' quartos, the Q₁ is not so bad as not to be trusted in details. Moreover, in spite of the cuts, the passage discussed in this essay is not abridged and it shows the above mentioned rather consistent differences from the Q₂ text.

I feel that if I want to avoid being accused of misapplied concentration on details or even pedantry, I have to sum up what kind of conclusions, consequences and profit may be attained from all that:

(1) The discussed passage of the balcony scene of *Romeo and Juliet* would in the interpretation suggested above necessitate a worth while if not very fundamental re-interpretation of the scene in question towards a less 'romantic' or rather less 'sentimental' opinion of it,

(2) It might indicate another possible and hitherto unknown echo of Boccaccio's *Decameron* in Shakespeare's plays. Professor T. J. B. Spencer, in his introduction to the delightful *Elizabethan Love Stories* (Spencer 1968), presents several examples of borrowings and echoes of Boccaccio and other Italian writers which cannot be accounted for by any Elizabethan translation previous to a given Shakespearean play discussed and postulates sufficient knowledge of Italian, French or even Spanish among Shakespeare's abilities to have enabled him to read his 'sources' in the original in case of need.

But it is true, my theory deals not with a story but with a motif and a conceit. The story, however, or the conceit or both, might have entered Shakespeare's mind by many possible channels quite unaccountable today. There might have been an intermediate Elizabethan link or links. To find it may be very difficult or even impossible, especially to those scholars who do not enjoy satisfactory access to Elizabethan sources and materials.

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