

# From Mariotto and Ganozza to Romeo and Giulietta: Metamorphoses of a Renaissance Tale

The practice of re-elaborating stories already written by others, of recasting extant narrative material was a rather common one among short-story writers in Italy, particularly in the period between the appearance of the *Decameron* and the end of the sixteenth century. This phenomenon, of course, is common to the entire literary production of that time, since imitation, not originality, was the ruling criterion for all writers. Writers of short stories were original only in their interpretation of the poetics of imitation, pushing it to the limit, till it came to mean that one could borrow freely from everyone else. With the possible exception of the theatre, in fact, in no other field is this phenomenon more noticeable than in that of the novella. Here it is so pronounced that Letterio Di Francia, writing earlier in our century a comprehensive tome on the novella for a history of literary genres in Italian literature, goes beyond the customary condemnation by historicist literary criticism of this practice, and labels it "thievery".<sup>1</sup> Recently this *modus operandi* by Renaissance short-story writers has been re-examined by literary critics who, obviously enough, have purposes in mind other than such pronouncements.<sup>2</sup> The new critical approaches are bent upon underlining among texts not the similarities, but the dissimilarities, the variations, the deviations conferred to the typical narrative structures and the traditional themes by individual authors, for the differences are never casual, never accidental, but always subjected to and revealing of the authors' ideology.

These theoretical justifications are almost unnecessary when it comes to the story of Romeo and Giulietta, so natural it is to

compare its various literary refashionings, both on a horizontal and on a vertical axis. Such a comparison has most often taken the shape of a search for the sources of Shakespeare's tragedy. As a critical approach, then, it has always underscored the correspondences among texts, not the divergences.<sup>3</sup> This approach has been taken more rarely and only recently.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this article is to look again at the first three narrative adaptations in the Italian vernacular of the story of the two lovers from Verona—that is, the short-stories by Masuccio Salernitano (1410-1475), Luigi Da Porto (1485-1529), and Matteo Bandello (1485-1561)—and, by focusing on the historical and cultural circumstances surrounding their recastings, to offer possible interpretations for the reasons which motivate them and for the ideological messages which they incorporate.

The individual narrative segments which make up the story are probably as ancient as the art of narration itself. However, they were first grouped together in the form familiar to us all by Masuccio Salernitano who worked on his *Novellino* from 1458 to 1475, the year of his death. His novella number 33, in fact, is already composed of the following microstructures: the clandestine marriage of the two lovers, the exile imposed on the young man for having been found guilty of murder, the arranged marriage for the young girl, her apparent death, the fatal mistiming of the message that finally brings about the death of the lovers (in this first formulation, he by beheading, she by starving herself to death).

In his dedication of his short story to a duke of his day, Masuccio writes that he submits for the duke's consideration "the most pitiful, unfortunate case of two wretched lovers" in order that he may judge "which of the two...loved more fervently" (427).<sup>5</sup> In keeping with his political stance, which is not only defensive but actively supportive of the Aragonese dynasty and rule in particular as well as of nobility in general, and in accordance with his ideological position on women—Masuccio is unrelentingly misogynist and his stories often fuel the fiercely anti-woman side of the debate on the respective worth of the two sexes—the author himself, in lieu of his ideal reader, concludes that the most passionate love is the man's, whose name in this version of the story is Mariotto (not yet Romeo), and, predictably enough for us, not the woman's, who here is called

Ganozza.<sup>6</sup> Thus his narrative structure is subservient to the task of confirming and reinforcing the value system of his day. For instance, the author often depicts the honour of the families involved as placed in jeopardy by the actions undertaken by Ganozza. Such considerations cause him to linger essentially over two issues: firstly, the unavoidable logic of the class structure, and secondly, the unreliability and irresponsibility displayed by the woman. Furthermore, Ganozza, whose standing in his eyes is partly redeemed by the fact that she does, after all, belong to the Sienese (not yet Veronese) nobility, is yet denied the dignity of a heroic death over her lover's corpse, as Masuccio announced in the summary paragraph preceding the story. He has her committed to a convent where she dies later for having deprived herself of food and sleep.

If Masuccio was the first to gather together the basic elements of the plot, Luigi Da Porto was the first to define forever the motifs, setting and principal characters for a story destined to become one of the most famous love stories of all time, even if we took Shakespeare's version as the paragon against which every other version is to be judged.<sup>7</sup> In Da Porto's novella, in fact, which is believed to have been written by June 1524, we find these additional elements: the feud and, therefore, the opposition by both families to a possible marriage between two of their members; the circumstances surrounding the lovers' falling in love; the love scenes, including the balcony scene; the scenes of despair; the murder of one of Giulietta's relatives (and not that of an ordinary citizen, as in Masuccio); the introduction of a faithful servant and that of Giulietta's nurse; the suicides of both lovers; the families' reconciliation.

His narration proceeds quickly towards its inescapable ending. The swift unfolding of the events seems to echo the intensity of the passion felt by the two lovers and the merciless advance of an evil and tragic fate. This version of the story is not burdened with ideological assumptions which the author seeks to promote or confirm. In the dedicatory epistle preceding the story—and it is no coincidence that it is addressed to a woman—Da Porto states that the reason for writing it is to “show clearly which risks, which tricky pitfalls, which cruel deaths Love at times brings upon wretched and unfortunate lovers” (95). The statement of the moral and didactic usefulness

of the story for its readers is not to be taken at face value. It is more a pretext than a true intent; it is made merely in deference to tradition rather than as a heartfelt resolve to censure certain patterns of behaviour deemed reproachable by the moral standards of the times.

The narration, it seems to me, is due more to the pleasure of narrating than anything else. Elements external to the text seem to confirm my contention. Da Porto was foremost an historian, not a writer of literary texts; this, in fact, is his only literary effort. Most importantly, the novella is a self-contained text, not a tale in a series, not a story imbedded in a collection whose general architecture always dictates certain interpretations and whose general design always implies an ideological point of view.

Matteo Bandello, writing only a few years later—it is believed between 1531 and 1545—avails himself of this storyline, and, although he seemingly does not alter the kernel elements which comprise the *fabula*, acts subtly upon them, finally succeeding in bringing the content of the story in line with the ideological objectives of his novella collection.

From a structural point of view, Bandello lengthens, amplifies, expands and weighs down the plot. As evidence of that, let us consider the two following microstructures, placed one at the very beginning of the story, one at the very end, thus becoming emblematic of the author's mode of composition. In order to define the setting, Da Porto's Veronese narrator finds it sufficient to say "in my beautiful home town" (97); Bandello's, however, feels compelled to give us an entire turgidly descriptive paragraph on Verona. If Da Porto confines himself to saying that the epitaph on the lovers' communal tomb explains the reason of their deaths, Bandello retells their deaths, almost entirely, in the sonnet which constitutes his epitaph.

I will provide two additional telling episodes. In the moments immediately preceding Romeo's death, Da Porto is not satisfied with recounting Romeo's enormous sense of loss. For dramatic expediency, he has him interjecting with brief but poignant first-person accounts of his despair. Bandello, on the other hand, cannot feel content with something similar. Therefore, first he narrates Romeo's state of mind and then he allots him not one but three very long and very eloquent

speeches, which Romeo pronounces after having ingested the poison he had taken with him to Giulietta's tomb.

In Da Porto's version, the balcony scene is occasioned by the fact that Romeo, hopelessly in love, had taken to frequenting Giulietta's neighbourhood at night. The young man, Da Porto tells us, at times paces the street on which Giulietta's house stands, at times climbs a wall of the house in order to hear the girl speak through her open window. One such night, made especially bright by the moonlight, Giulietta sees him and they thus engage in a dialogue during the course of which they declare eternal love to each other. This segment flows very naturally, and is free of cumbersome details and improbable motivations.

Conversely, Bandello burdens the scene with a seemingly useless wealth of details and with excessively long, detailed descriptions, unlikely motivations and convoluted logic. Here is Bandello's transmogrification: he introduces the nurse to whom Giulietta entrusts a letter addressed to Romeo and containing instructions for him—he is to come to her at five the next morning and bring a rope ladder with him. In order to carry out her instructions, Romeo has to introduce an additional character, Pietro, his faithful servant, who is ordered to find such a ladder. Together they come to the place agreed upon, just below Giulietta's window; together they hoist the ladder up, with the aid of a string which Giulietta, helped in the task by the nurse, has lowered from the window to which the two women secure the ladder. At this point the two servants disappear to afford the lovers some privacy. Giulietta now tells Romeo how and when they can join in holy matrimony. The exchange having come to an end, the foursome remove the ladder.

The clandestine marriage is, of course, essential to the storyline and if the structural unit under examination served the purpose of leading up to it, then we would have enough justification for it, no matter how severely we would judge it on aesthetic grounds. Except that Bandello had already made mention of it: Romeo and Giulietta had already agreed to marry in a previous encounter. Clearly this episode, in its redundancy to the plot, must find its reason for being on some other plane of meaning.

The rhetorical figure of *amplificatio* does not represent, in the

works by short-story writers of this and earlier times, simplistic, mannerist variations on pre-existing texts; it is, instead, the formal device which allows them to intervene in narrative situations they inherit from their predecessors and make them new, make them current. Such interventions are to be read as the most telltale signs of the writers' aspirations to represent reality as mimetically as possible. The artistic representation of reality, however, is never devoid of ideological significance. Here it serves two purposes: the first, and most obvious one, is that the verbosity constitutes the formal device which allows Bandello to incorporate Da Porto's version (Da Porto's text is often found verbatim in Bandello's *rifacimento*); the second is that it is in the prolixity of his discourse that Bandello hides his modifications, his subtle, but significant manipulations, of the story on an ideological level.

Barry Jones in two of his articles on this very topic, mostly without the support of this contrastive approach, reaches the conclusion that Bandello's version of the tale of Romeo and Giulietta is misogynist and patricentric in so far as it gives edifying characterization of every male protagonist, including Romeo, and depicts all women as weak and given to emotional excesses to the detriment of reason.<sup>8</sup> According to Jones, Bandello makes Giulietta the scapegoat of the situation: it is, after all, her excessive melancholy and her depression following Romeo's exile which cause the tragedy. At the same time, Jones has us note, Bandello exonerates Romeo. In order to prove his point, he calls attention to two events. The first revolves around Romeo's first love. Da Porto barely mentions it, informing the reader that Romeo attends the house party organized by the head of the Cappelletti family because he follows "some cruel woman" there. Bandello, on the other hand, dwells on Romeo's first love, has it last two years and describes it as "constant and ardent" (441). He thus effectively eliminates any possible implication of fickleness on Romeo's part in matters of love. The second event mentioned by Jones, revolves around Tebaldo's murder. In Da Porto's version, Romeo, who is a participant in the street fight between the two factions, has some initial consideration for Giulietta's relatives, but finally strikes Tebaldo mortally because he was "overwhelmed by rage" (103). In Bandello's, Romeo kills Tebaldo in self-defense, and if this were not

enough, completely by accident, and only after he had attempted, alas in vain, to reconcile the warring parties. Romeo, then, is the only reasonable voice amidst chaos, a pacifist, a mediator, an ambassador of good will, and an innocent victim of circumstances.

My own analysis in part corroborates Jones's findings and conclusions, in part aims to go even further. For now, however, relying on his very sound arguments, I could point to other examples which make them even more cogent.

Firstly, in Da Porto's rendition, the two young people fall in love while being well aware of each other's identity; in Bandello, they ignore who the other is, for otherwise Romeo would have to be depicted to act thoughtlessly, to be unmindful of the consequences of his actions. Bandello cannot admit that: when his Romeo learns the girl's identity, it is already too late, for "the wound had already been opened and the amorous poison had already penetrated deeply" (446).

Secondly, Giulietta's inconsolable despair over Romeo's departure from the city has perhaps a reason for being in Da Porto, where the exile is for life, but it is utterly unjustifiable in Bandello, where we are first told that the banishment is a temporary measure to be revoked momentarily and then given the term of one year. Bandello's option of providing a precise figure, and a small one at that, is functional to his Giulietta's purported lack of self-control.

Thirdly, in the matter of the arranged marriage, in both versions Giulietta, in refusing to consent to it, defies her father's fury; however, while Da Porto restricts himself to referring her answer to her father's proposal—"That will never be!" (107)—Bandello cannot refrain from editorializing, and adds that Giulietta answers "with more defiance than is appropriate to a young girl" (459).

Fourthly, in keeping with his presentation of impeccable male characters, Bandello's Frate Lorenzo is an incredibly outstanding man: he is a theologian, a great philosopher, a superior herbalist, knowledgeable in magic, an all-around very learned man. Da Porto's friar, on the other hand, who initially does not even have a name, has a more human dimension. He is described simply as a "great philosopher and scientist" (102). Furthermore, he is a friend of Romeo's not altogether because

he is taken by the latter's faultless nature—although he does find him “feared, courageous and cautious” (102)—, but because Romeo's friendship also serves his own self-interests. There is more. In both versions, when Giulietta, in the family tomb, is about to awake from her sleeping potion, she realizes she is being kissed by someone. In both cases she suspects Frate Lorenzo. In *Da Porto*, however, the suspicion is inconsequential and it rather conforms to the traditional slurs and attacks on the clergy, especially on monastic orders, typical of novellas ever since Boccaccio and earlier. In *Bandello* it is another matter, and not only because his version of this story, indeed his entire collection of tales, is devoid of any criticism of individual clergymen and of the Church as an institution.<sup>9</sup> From our observations so far it should be clear that *Bandello's* further characterization of Frate Lorenzo is not an end on itself. This, too, is an element functional to displaying yet another of Giulietta's unappealing qualities: she has less than a pure mind. Also, her being suspicious of such a “very saintly” (450) man speaks more of her character than of Frate Lorenzo's.

Finally, the two examples cited above, in the initial stages of this contrastive analysis, —that is, Romeo's demeanour and actions shortly before his death and the detailed circumstances leading up to the balcony scene—can also be interpreted in this light: the elaborate speeches Romeo is given to recite illustrate another of his talents—his eloquence—, while Giulietta's suggestion to bring a rope ladder proves her recklessness, her lack of consideration for Romeo's well-being, her carelessness of risks and consequences.

We could go on at length citing instances capable of supporting this line of inquiry, looking at every character and noting *Bandello's* modifications, which, at first glance and taken individually, seem too slight and, therefore, too irrelevant to make a difference but which finally amount to a radical transformation of the story. Let us take Giulietta's mother as a final example. In both versions, the idea of marrying the girl off is attributed to the mother. This, as Jones has pointed out, is, after Giulietta's own fit of despair, the most immediate cause for the tragedy which is destined to ensue. The error in judgement made by the mother in *Bandello*, in misinterpreting Giulietta's despair, further suggests women's generally imperfect, deficient nature. It



is not so in Da Porto where I daresay the occurrence is of no appreciable consequence given that it is counterbalanced by the mother's intuition that Giulietta's refusal to consent to the arranged marriage may be due to her loving another man. Bandello's mother figure has no such insight into her daughter's heart. It is her father who suspects her love for another man other than the one chosen for her by the family; it is he who instructs his wife to find out whether that may indeed be the case.

The process of comparing and contrasting is a necessary, albeit a tedious, one for it is the totality of such apparently insignificant changes which reveals the scope of Bandello's cumulative deviation on the poetic material he had inherited and which allows us to start drawing some conclusions. The point is this: it is behind the verbosity of his discourse, the repetitions, detailed descriptions, long-windedness of the direct speeches, the reiteration of schemes and structural units that Bandello conceals his manipulations, which ultimately reveal his political agenda in defense and support of the status quo.

It should also be pointed out that the rhetorical figure of *amplificatio* is active in this novella not only on the formal plane of organization. It is extended to the content itself, in that every emotion—love, rage, grief, despair—is exaggerated, intensified, heightened, exacerbated. Let one example suffice for all: the hostility between the two families is much more pronounced here than in Da Porto's version.

And yet it is excesses that Bandello warns about in the dedicatory letter preceding the tale; it is lack of temperance that he wants to chastise and excess of passion that he wants to curb. That, according to the author's own stated intent, is the moral of the story. "I wrote it," he says, "to warn the young that they should learn to be ruled by moderation and not to rush into things" (439). The reader, however, is left with a totally different impression. Since the story line does not change from previous versions, the more excessive are the emotions felt by the protagonists, the more reasonable seem the characters presumably in their power.<sup>10</sup>

As proof of that, let us consider the following instances: (1) no matter how much out of control Romeo's first love was, he succeeds in subduing it and the relationship has virtually ended

by the time he meets and falls in love with Giulietta; (2) whatever purpose Bandello had in mind when he wrote it, the scene of the street fight between the two factions displays a Romeo admirably capable of self-control; (3) despite the unrestrained despair in which Giulietta often indulges and which causes her repeatedly to come up with wild talk and crazy schemes, each time she does in the end give in to reason and gladly takes the practical advice given to her by the friar and by Romeo; (4) however intense is the terror she feels in imagining herself buried next to Tebaldo's fetid, rotting corpse, Giulietta does finally rein in her fears and drink the potion.

There are enough reasons to ask whether the author is not being inconsistent. Is his stated purpose in telling the story not incongruent with the facts as he expounds them? By what devious reasoning do these protagonists, the embodiment of reasonableness and rationality, become the epitome of blinding passion itself? The problem here is that, no matter how judiciously they behave later on, Romeo and Giulietta are guilty of that initial transgression against paternal authority that is here symbolic of Authority itself, which, at this point in time, is the most essential manifestation of the Catholic Reformation. From this perspective, Bandello's exacerbation of the hostility between the families can only be interpreted as a device used by the author to increase the scope of the violation enacted by the two lovers. The author's intolerance for the initiative displayed by the two, an action unfortunately not sanctioned by any authority, is responsible for the single most outrageous variation brought about by Bandello on Da Porto's outline (it is, in fact, the one constitutive element of the fabula which changes): the reconciliation of the families is only temporary in Bandello. It must necessarily be so, for in this new hierarchy of values, Giulietta's public or civic purpose for agreeing to marrying Romeo—which is to become a means to everlasting peace—has to be hampered and ultimately nullified. The ostentatious rationality enveloping the story as well as the verbosity of Bandello's discourse need to find a different justification: they are elements which intensify the didactic value of the tale.

Furthermore, it is important to note that although fate features prominently in the story, Bandello never mentions it,

never brings it to the foreground, neither to invoke it nor to curse it, as Da Porto at times does at the turning points of the plot, that is, precisely the ones decided by fate. In Bandello's rendition, the ideological economy of the story would make any observation on fate superfluous because it is deemed obvious. However, it is precisely in this postulation of the obvious that we find the tacit approval by Bandello in censuring, not as he ostensibly declares, unbridled, compelling passion—or at least not only that—, but more poignantly Romeo's and Giulietta's original transgression, one which Bandello cannot let go unpunished if the authoritarianism of the institutions of his day is to be upheld.

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*Novelle*, ed. Giuseppe Guido Ferrero (Torino: UTET, 1974).

#### NOTES

- 1 I am referring to *La novellistica*, volume I of *Storia dei generi letterari* (Milano: Vallardi, 1924).
- 2 See, for example, Marziano Guglielminetti, *La cornice e il furto. Studi sulla novella del '500* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1984).
- 3 For a good bibliographical review on this issue, see J.L. Levenson, "Romeo and Juliet before Shakespeare," *Studies in Philology* 81 (1984), pp. 325-347.
- 4 Other than the ones to which I will be referring later on, the studies I found most interesting are: L. Capecchi, "Romeo and Juliet: due versioni: Bandello e Shakespeare," *English Miscellany* 28-29 (1979-80), pp. 61-90; M. Cavalchini, "Bandello, Shakespeare, and the Tale of Two Lovers from Verona," *Italian Quarterly* 70 (1974), pp. 37-48; A.H. Diverres, "The Pyramus and Thisbe Story and its Contribution to the Romeo and Juliet Legend," in H.T. Barnwell et al., eds. *The Classical Tradition in French Literature: Essays Presented to R.C. Knight* (Edinburgh, 1977), pp. 9-22.

- 5 The novellas cited in my text are found in: for Masuccio Salernitano, *Novelle italiane. Il Quattrocento*, ed. Gioachino Chiarini (Milano: Garzanti, 1982); for Luigi Da Porto, *Novelle italiane. Il Cinquecento*, ed. Marcello Ciccuto (Milano: Garzanti, 1982); for Matteo Bandello, *Novelle*, ed. Giuseppe Guido Ferrero (Torino: UTET, 1974). The translations are mine.
- 6 On Masuccio and his time see: E. Grano, *Un Boccaccio alla corte aragonese: Masuccio Salernitano* (Salerno: Boccia, 1972); *Masuccio: novelliere salernitano dell'età aragonese*, eds. P. Borraro and F. D'Episcopo (Galatina: Congedo, 1978); L. Mulas, *Lettura del Novellino* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1984); L. Reina, *Masuccio Salernitano: un narratore alla corte dei Sanseverino* (Salerno: Edisu, 1979); E. Spinelli, *Masuccio Salernitano: struttura delle crisi e poetica del diverso* (Salerno: R. Reggiani, 1980); *Strutture narrative e conflitti sociali nel "Novellino" di Masuccio Salernitano*, ed. M. Cautadella (Salerno: Palladio, 1978).
- 7 On Da Porto see: G.H. Bumgardner, Jr., "An Antecedent of Romeo and Juliet," *YULG*, 59 (1975), pp. 268-76; H. Hauvette, *La "Morte Vivante"*, Bibliothèque de la Revue des cours et Conférences (Paris, 1933); A. Torri, *Bibliografia della Novella "Giulietta e Romeo" di Luigi Da Porto*, Biblioteca degli eruditi e dei bibliofili, LXVII (Firenze: Sansoni, 1961).
- 8 "Romeo and Juliet: Boccaccio and the Novella Tradition," *Stanford Italian Revue* 1 (1979), pp. 75-99; "Romeo and Juliet: The Genesis of a Classic" in *Italian Storytellers* (Dublin: Irish Academic P, 1989).
- 9 On Bandello and his time see: G. Getto, "Il significato del Bandello," *Lettere italiane* 7(1955), pp. 314-329; G. Herczeg, "Matteo Bandello: scrittore di una società che cambia," *Critica letteraria*, 7 (1979), pp. 353-364; G. Petrocchi, *Matteo Bandello, l'artista e il novelliere* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1949); L. Russo, "Matteo Bandello novellatore 'cortegiano'," *Belfagor* 16 (1961), pp. 949-76; *Matteo Bandello novelliere europeo*, ed. U. Rozzo (Tortona: Litocoop, 1982); *Gli uomini, le città e i tempi di Matteo Bandello*, ed. U. Rozzo (Tortona: Centro studi Matteo Bandello e la cultura rinascimentale, 1985).
- 10 This point has been made before by J. Levenson who notes that in the story there is a conflict between "compelling emotion and reasonableness" (p. 333), that this "extraordinary tale of passion is confined within bounds of logic" (p. 337), and that "passion generally defers to reason" (p.339).