



“Shakespeares” (Lainer, *Drowning the Book*, 188) who continue to trace the path of Shakespeare’s globalization.<sup>1</sup> This has made Shakespeare an adaptable cultural resource used in theatrical and cinematic adaptations, but also in visual iconography, tourist itineraries, recreational activities and products, such as, for instance, ‘Playing Shakespeare’ and ‘Karaoke Shakespeare’. The fact that Shakespeare is identified as, among other things, marvellous dramatist, cultural icon, and ideological symbol engages us with the phenomenon of what Bryan Reynolds refers to as “Shakespace,” a term that encompasses the “plurality of Shakespeare-related [...] spaces and the time, speed, and force at which they transmit and replicate” (7) through places, cultures, and times. In such a context, Shakespace comes to be related to the different ways in which Shakespeare has been consumed and reinvented around the world.<sup>2</sup> His cultural iconicity, which could arguably be identified nowadays as a *brand*, has been appropriated and exploited, for instance, in digital and virtual re-narrations<sup>3</sup> or in a wide range of commercial products.

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that Shakespeare has been turned into a sort of brand is undeniable and many scholars have focused on this topic: Robert, Shaughnessy. Introduction. In *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*. Ed. Robert Shaughnessy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008: 1-5. Manfred, Pfister. “In states unborn and accents yet unknown: Shakespeare and European Canon.” In *Shifting the Scene. Shakespeare in European Culture*. Ed. Lambert, Bezzola and Brian Engler. Newark: Delaware University Press, 2004: 41-66. Douglas, Lainer. *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Kate, McLuskie, and Kate, Rumbold. “Branding Shakespeare.” In *Cultural value in twenty-first-century England: The Case of Shakespeare*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015: 210-240.

<sup>2</sup> Recent studies have focused on the intercultural negotiation through Shakespeare and the consideration of spatial studies of Shakespeare: Robert, Sawyer and Varsha Panjwani. “Shakespeare in Cross-Cultural Spaces.” *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance* 15.1 (2017): 9-14. Ina, Habermann, and Michelle, Witen. *Shakespeare and Space: Theatrical Explorations of the Spatial Paradigm*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. For a detailed study on *Romeo and Juliet* as an integral part of Europe’s cultural heritage see Juan F. Cerdá, Dirk Delabastita and Keith Gregor, eds. *Romeo and Juliet in European Culture*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> For an account on the tragedy’s digital and virtual re-mediations and re-appropriations see, for instance, Maurizio, Calbi. “He speaks ... or rather ... He tweets.” *Spectral Shakespeares: Media Adaptations in the Twenty-First Century*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013: 137-160. Eleni, Timplalexi. “Shakespeare in Digital Games and Virtual Worlds.” *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance* 18.33 (2018): 129-144. Pietro Luigi, Iaia. “Riformulazioni e Reinterpretazioni Transmediali di *Romeo and Juliet*.” *Lingue e Linguaggi* 27 (2018): 263-283.



The house is characterised by elegant interiors decorated with furniture and costumes that resemble the Renaissance style. Besides the balcony, one of the prized pieces of furniture inside the celebratory monument is Juliet's bed, that is, the actual bed used in Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 film adaptation of the tragedy.

In addition, the house's courtyard visually mirrors the sanctuary-like style of the interiors where thousands of tourists go there 'on pilgrimage' every day. By translating the words of Juliet's father into action, "For I will raise a statue of pure glad | That whiles Verona by that name is known" (5: 3: 298-299), on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April 1972 the city council placed in the courtyard the house's most famous sacred object: the bronze statue of Juliet by sculptor Nereo Costantini. Unfortunately, in 2014, the conservation conditions of Costantini's sculpture, badly affected by decades of exposure to tourists and visitors, especially as a result of their good-luck ritual of love in taking pictures and touching Juliet's breast, made it necessary to replace the statue with a replica. In line with the mystical mode of each holy place, the courtyard also features a gift shop that is the crowning glory of the devotional vibe to Juliet, while the walls beneath the balcony are completely covered by graffiti scribbles and notes from visitors asking for guidance in love or praising her with love messages.

The city also provides a fictitious architectural form to Juliet's tomb (*Tomba di Giulietta*) which is located just a ten-minute walk from 'her' house, outside of the city walls. A simple marble sarcophagus lies empty in an atmospheric crypt below the former Franciscan monastery, San Francesco al Corso, in Via Luigi da Porto, 5. At the end of the nineteenth century, the site was transformed into a museum where the frescoed facades of Renaissance buildings of Verona and other works of art were recovered. The grave has an anteroom with walls covered, likewise those of the house, by love phrases, while on the wall outside the crypt is placed a slab of marble engraved with Romeo's lines: "A grave? O, no; a lantern [...] this vault a feasting presence full of light." (5: 3: 83-6). Thus, in such fabricated celebratory settings, where hyperreality and reality are constantly renegotiated, both Juliet's house and tomb embody a process of de-realisation of reality that merges into what Baudrillard defines as the third order of *simulacra*: that is a phase of simulation in which the hyperreal becomes more real than reality itself.<sup>5</sup>

The highly commercial and touristic impact of such civic spaces is widely supported by the fact that tourists can get married there. Civil unions, in fact, are held both in the main hall of Juliet's house and in Sala Guarienti, a dreamy and elegant room located on the first floor of the museum hosting the

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<sup>5</sup> See Jean Baudrillard's elaboration of the ideas of hyperreality and simulacrum that characterise today's global consumer culture. "Simulacra and Simulation." In *Selected Writings*. Ed. Mark Poster. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988: 166-184.













education. Although it is hard to sketch, at least in topographic terms, the letter-writer profile, as most of the messages today are directly sent by email, his/her claim for help gives evidence of the troubled social and cultural background in which he/she is confined. Most of the letters voice the anxieties of individuals struggling for racial and religious discrimination as well as parental oppression, while others display instances of identity crisis which, according to sociologists like Berger and Kellner, permanently afflicts individuals living in a modern society: for them, in fact, modern identity is “open-ended, transitory, and liable to ongoing change” (64).

Given this context, one question should be put forward: which is the reason behind the letter-writers’ choice to convey their messages to Juliet? One possible answer can be found in what Kenneth Burke refers to as sociological criticism of literature which casts “Art forms, like ‘tragedy or ‘comedy’” as a mode of social grounding: literary works are, in Burke’s words, “equipment for living” (10) within which individuals re-situate the self by sizing up situations in various ways. In doing so, they re-appropriate the contextual frameworks of literary works in order to face reality and find a strategy to take on and react to their own problematic situations. In the context of this ongoing tradition of writing to Juliet, letter-writers realign their life experience to that of a literary character, Juliet, casting her as a qualified problem solver.

Writing to Juliet helps them to cope with their mundane anxieties and, at the same time, becomes a strategy for socializing losses, for easy consolation, for warding off evil eye. In constructing multiple images of Juliet, letter-writers cast Shakespeare’s character as an adaptable, changeable and flexible resource which can be appropriated according to the their needs. In such a context, these letters become a radical site of misrecognition in which Juliet’s image comes to be dislocated from her literary framework.

For those who write, and even for those who reply, she is no more Shakespeare’s Juliet, but an imaginary and ideal pen pal willing to listen without judging and to offer comfort to lovelorn teenagers and troubled adults: writing to Juliet thus is much like a psychotherapy treatment free of charge, no matter how much successfully it works. Yet, the alarming impact of the letters’ contents, of course, poses questions on the way in which addressees deal with them and on the fact that they take up the responsibility of giving responses, a task which involves, albeit in an indirect way, the city itself. Its external image indeed may be potentially affected by these answers, as the letters’ respondents acts, after all, on behalf of the Veronese community and, accordingly, on behalf of the Verona city council. This finds confirmation in the fact that, a few years ago, some municipal officers asked the Juliet Club’s staff to bring the letters to the city’s cultural affairs office where two city secretaries, with a good knowledge of English, began to read and respond to the missives. Taking on this task on the top of their usual jobs was a difficult enterprise and soon after the letters



simplify, sentimentalize and commodify the story of the ‘star-crossed lovers’ which is equally inscribed in most of the letters that everyday reach Verona. Set in the historical centre of Verona, Winick’s film notably partakes of the tourist experience, serving as a good advertisement for the city’s main attractions. Both the film and the city’s topographic reality, in fact, are engaged in an ‘archaeological approach’ to Shakespeare that functions as a highly commercial crowd pleaser.

At the same time, references to Verona as a must-see location are also considerably numerous in the letters addressed to Juliet: “Dear Juliet, [...] how wonderful it could be to see the place recognized as a symbol of great and all-winning love” (506/2002); another writer also expresses his desire to visit Juliet’s house: “Dear Juliet, [...] I wish to visit your home, one day. If I only could be there, at the balcony, standing and dreaming, for a moment” (973/2003).

Letters are also imbued with references to Verona as a sacred locale where tourists should undertake their pilgrimage: “Dreaming to visit Verona since 1968. Many times in my dreams I was walking along the Veronese streets, bringing flowers to those lovers”. This epistolary phenomenon, much like Winick’s film, can be seen as, in the words of Dennis Kennedy, instances of “cultural tourism” (175) which strategically turn art into a profitable entertainment. These alternative narratives around the play suggest that, in the twenty-first century, Shakespeare comes to be a repository of meanings transferable to other fields of cultural production depending upon the needs and purposes of the user.

Thus, as attested by these narratives, Verona’s civic spaces are part of a fruitful pilgrimage-like experience where visitors come to pay tribute addressing Juliet as a sanctified entity. At the same time, the tragedy’s sense of a place with its own rules and rituals is vividly mirrored in today’s social and cultural practises as well as in tourist itineraries which seem, albeit not intentionally, oriented to restore the urban violence projected in the play, presenting a setting, Verona, halfway between a theme park and a sacred site.

Also in theatre, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* has become experimental and even interactive by means of alternative re-writings such as *Such Tweet Sorrow*, a production devised by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2010 which was enacted over five weeks, mainly on Twitter. Anyone with access to the internet or, at least, anyone who was Twitter-literate could become involved with *Such Tweet Sorrow*. Rather than passively observing the action, the Twitter audience could leave comments, re-tweet sections of the dialogue and post videos and photos on the profiles of the characters. If, in the twenty-first century, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* can be represented in 140-word tweets and its characters turned into imaginary pen-pal friends, then the meaning and value of Shakespeare today needs to be interrogated.

Today Shakespeare functions with a plurality and flexibility that mirrors culture in general, with his plays often re-appropriated, even hyper-appropriated, into a variety of formats, for purely instrumental means suitable for the world wide web or the tourist market. While this ongoing culturally-inflected process of ‘re-inventing’ and re-appropriating Shakespeare is characterised by the strategically related *languages* of art and marketing, bardolatry and business, it also celebrates Shakespeare’s flexibility as a cultural object which can be simultaneously local and global, elitist and popular, real and hyperreal, traditional and innovative, all in the same moment.

Within the ‘wall of the fair Verona’ there is *space* for intertwined performative, civic and narrative *spaces* which *place* Shakespeare as a commodified icon for the city’s self-fashioning. These instances, while pointing to a plurality of remediations that have deterritorialized Shakespeare and shifted him away from the stage, they simultaneously cast Verona as a potential locus of reactualization and ritualization of the tragedy’s dramatic core.

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Figure 1: Juliet statue, Verona – Photograph by Eleonora Oggiano



Figure 2: Juliet's house, Verona – Photograph by Eleonora Oggiano



Figure 3: *Verona in Love*, Verona – Photograph by Eleonora Oggiano





Figure 4: Letterbox at Juliet’s house – Photograph by Eleonora Oggiano