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The Shakespeare Brand in Contemporary “Fair Verona”

Abstract: The idea that Shakespeare belongs to the world is certainly not new. From the beginning of his afterlife as a dramatist two issues have been consistently put forward by his contemporaries: 1) his art’s universality—for Ben Jonson, Shakespeare was the one “To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe”—and 2) his ability in appropriating foreign exotic environments which have notoriously characterised most of his plays. The value of such claims, which seem to be so present to us, helped to identify Shakespeare as an ‘universal’ icon whose work transcends time and space, gradually fostering, in and outside Britain, the so-called ‘Bardification of culture’, a phenomenon which persists, even more powerfully, nowadays. This study examines the different ways through which Verona has contributed in popularizing and elaborating the myth of Romeo and Juliet into a variety of formats suitable for the tourism market. By taking into account the so-called ‘Shakespace’ phenomenon, it focuses on what I have labelled as the ‘R&J-influenced spaces’ which account for a number of civic, cultural, and narrative spaces generated by and constructed upon the myth of the Veronese lovers.

Keywords: Branding Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, Letters to Juliet, Verona

Shakespeare’s plays have been constantly staged, filmed, translated, discussed re- or deconstructed and not only in Europe but globally. Their dissemination across time and space has encouraged, even outside the academic boundaries, alternative opportunities for re-appropriating his works, frequently in ways that blur the divisions between highbrow and lowbrow, minority and mass culture. This has gradually enhanced, in and outside Britain, the so-called “Bardification of culture” (Kennedy 175), a phenomenon which persists, even more powerfully, nowadays and which casts Shakespeare as an example of the marketplace grabbing “any pre-tested public domain property with instant name recognition” (O’Brien 11).

Throughout history, and especially in twenty-first century, Shakespeare’s enduring high-cultural status has coexisted with a series of multiply-mediated

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“Shakespeares” (Lainer, *Drowning the Book*, 188) who continue to trace the path of Shakespeare’s globalization.¹ 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.² His cultural iconicity, which could arguably be identified nowadays as a *brand*, has been appropriated and exploited, for instance, in digital and virtual re-narrations³ or in a wide range of commercial products.

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ 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.

Inspired by the reverberating power of the Shakespace phenomenon is what I would label as R&J-influenced spaces which account for a number of civic, cultural, and narrative *spaces* generated by and, often fictitiously, constructed upon the myth of these “star-crossed lovers” for whom, as Romeo suggests, “There is no world without Verona walls” (3: 3: 17).

Within the walls of Verona, today, the name of Romeo and Juliet resounds in various forms and manifestations: their image becomes a public good to be used not only in theatrical performances and festivals but also in celebratory monuments, civic ceremonies, tourist itineraries, recreational and social activities as well as sports events. Verona, in fact, presents a ‘Shakespeare’ that has crossed over from high art representation to the realm of commodified icon and image available to all consumers. *Romeo and Juliet* has significantly increased the city’s allure and mystique and Verona, in turn, constructed its fortune and fame thanks to its fabricated buildings devoted to Shakespeare’s Veronese lovers.

The universal nature of the plot makes the play “eminently adaptable and imaginable” in different geographical, cultural and performative *spaces* casting *Romeo and Juliet* as “matrix” capable of accommodating and fostering many specific “versions that creatively reimagine characters, events and settings” (Cerdá, Delabastita and Gregor 4). In Verona, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is often re-appropriated into a variety of formats functioning as a highly commercial crowd pleaser. In the light of the number of cultural, social and discursive practises constructed upon the R&J-influenced spaces, the city itself displays a sort of topography of civic inventiveness which ‘dislocates’ and re-elaborates the characters’ mythical allure for the tourism market.⁴

Verona’s celebratory monuments are especially devoted to Juliet whose influenced-civic spaces provide a sense of physical continuity between past and present making her myth as essential part of the urban territory. Juliet’s house (*Casa di Giulietta*), located in Via Cappello 23, had always belonged to the Dal Cappello family, commonly known as the Cappelletti. This was so similar to the name of Juliet’s family, the Capulets, that the house became her family home in everyone’s imagination and this positively gave a great boost to Verona’s tourist industry. To such a significant association was given extra weight by the convenient fact that, in 1905, only after the purchase of the ‘stallo’ of the Dal Cappello family by the municipality, the director of the Verona Museums, Antonio Avena, placed a balcony in the courtyard of the tower-house. The city council decided to turn the building into a museum: thus, Juliet’s house was born.

⁴ This study is a revised and extended version of a paper I have presented at the international symposium on *Romeo and Juliet: Within Whose Scope of Choice? From Renaissance to Contemporary Civic Crisis and Reconciliation*, University of Verona, 12 April 2013.

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 8th 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.⁵

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

⁵ 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.

‘grave’. In Verona, Romeo and Juliet are turned into commodified icons whose name serves to advertise local products, such as the chocolate sweets Juliet’s kisses (*Baci di Giulietta*) and more importantly, cultural, sport and civic events for which tourists come from all over the world. In 1993, the Verona city council began to organise a one-day civic festival with dancers, musicians, performers, and players dressed as Romeo and Juliet processing through the city streets. On this occasion an open air painting marathon was also organised where one hundred artists, were invited to complete in just one day a painting devoted to Romeo and Juliet. In recent years, this civic festival turned into a one day-celebration devoted to Juliet with musicians, dancers, public readings and productions of *Romeo and Juliet*. This cultural event usually takes place on Mid-September, a date that supposedly coincides with Juliet’s birthday as suggested by Matteo Bandello’s *Novelle* (1554), that is, one of the tragedy’s sources.⁶

Among all the Veronese civic celebrations surrounding the name of the two ‘star-crossed lovers’, ‘Verona in Love’, a cultural event that takes place on the second week of February, is certainly the most famous one. On these days, the touring visitor, walking the streets, is cheered by an ‘urban itinerary of love’ with the historic city centre adorned with lights and heart-shaped decorations meant to celebrate and visually enhance the romantic allure that surrounds each event. During the festival, a full programme of activities and celebrations is devised to entertain visitors: a local sport event called ‘Giulietta e Romeo Half-Marathon’,⁷ a prize for the best love letter sent to Juliet,⁸ itinerant performances, such as a masque-like entertainment entitled ‘Shakespeare and Love’ which brings together theatre, dance, and music, as well as walking tours from Juliet’s house to Juliet’s tomb.

This year, ‘Verona in Love 2020’ was characterised by a flowering of civic inventiveness⁹ in the name of Romeo and Juliet whose commodity marketization¹⁰ was significantly highlighted by the slogan associated to the event itself: ‘Se ami qualcuno portalo a Verona!’.¹¹

⁶ “Ella a questa santa Eufemia che viene compirà i suoi diciotto anni” (On Saint Euphemia’s day she will turn eighteen *my trans.*) The feast day of Saint Euphemia is celebrated on September 16th. Matteo, Bandello. *Novelle Novella IX*. Ed. Delmo Maestri. 4 vols. Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 1992-1996: 390.

⁷ See the official website: <https://giuliettaeromeohalfmarathon.it/en/> [23/02/2020].

⁸ See the official website: <http://www.julietclub.com/en/premio-cara-giulietta-2020/> [23/02/2020].

⁹ <https://www.dolcementeinlove.com/> [23/02/2020].

¹⁰ Non-official websites also advertise the Veronese festival as a unique and romantic touristic experience: “Verona in Love 2020 awaits to fill the hearts of amusement. The holiday of ‘love programme’ continues up to Sunday 16 February.” <https://www.themayor.eu/lt/bring-your-love-to-verona-this-weekend> [23/02/2020] “Verona has been synonymous with love for centuries. The Verona in Love event is four full days of

The so-called ‘Market in Love’, in Piazza dei Signori, arranged in the shape of a giant heart, offers stalls which sell typical Veronese products, cooking shows and romantic gift ideas such as the ‘Seal of Love’ on which an image of Romeo and Juliet is depicted. Moving to Piazza Bra, tourists can embark on an exciting experience on the ‘Air Balloon of Love’ and enjoy an amazing view of the city. On Saint Valentine’s Day, they can walk through the ‘Green Labyrinth of Love’: a path through which lovers eventually meet at the centre of the labyrinth, facing the reproduction of Juliet’s balcony.

To the numerous forms through which Verona has contributed in popularizing and elaborating the myth of Romeo and Juliet belongs the epistolary phenomenon ‘letters to Juliet’ which, since the early twentieth century, has turned Shakespeare’s heroine into the addressee of an untold number of epistles written by people all over the world. The dreamy custom of writing letters to Juliet inspired the equally dreamy Hollywood film *Letters to Juliet* (2010), which tells the story of an American tourist who finds and replies to a long love letter sent to Juliet fifty years before.

The story of this letter-writing phenomenon dates back to 1937 when visitors to Juliet’s tomb started to leave messages to Juliet after completing the so-called ‘ritual of love’ devised by Ettore Solimani, the former custodian of the tomb. He invited couples, married or not, to follow him into the crypt and to stand one on either side of the tomb: “Hold hands, he would say, and think of a *pensiero d’amore* and exchange a kiss”¹² (Friedman and Friedman 51). Solimani reported a key-episode about an oddly formal young couple who visited the site and after completing the ritual of love asked him if they could leave a ‘letter for Juliet’. Obviously, he said yes. From then on, tourists began to leave spontaneous thoughts that Solimani strategically placed on a large stand at the tomb’s entrance. However, not all messages were composed on the spot. Letters, frequently addressed simply ‘Juliet, Verona’, arrived from far away writers inspired by articles on ‘the city of love’.¹³ Later on, Solimani began replying to the numerous messages he received and eventually writers addressed their mail directly to him or, rather, to ‘the Secretary of Juliet’. This established

cultural events. Visitors can spend unforgettable days listening to live music, attending book presentations and theatrical performances, or visiting the most romantic parts of the city of Romeo and Juliet.” <https://magazine.dooid.it/23/02/2020>].

¹¹ ‘If you love someone, take them to Verona!’ *my trans.*

¹² ‘Love thought’ *my trans.*

¹³ For a detailed account on Solimani as ‘Secretary of Juliet’ see Lise, Friedman and Ceil, Friedman. “The Letters Begin.” In *Letters to Juliet: Celebrating Shakespeare’s Greatest Heroine, the Magical City of Verona, and the Power of Love*. New York: Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 2006: 47-66.

tradition of writing to Juliet is still alive today. Since 1985 the activity of replying to all messages is coordinated by the Juliet Club, an organization founded by Giulio Tamassia, who, with a group of volunteers has devised a meticulous registration system to ensure that every letter is logged in, answered and preserved. At the Club, letters continued to arrive, increasing in number and languages and captivating the attention of the international press.

Given the widespread crisis dramatized in Shakespeare's tragedy as a starting point, the letters written to Juliet deserve to be explored in the light of the different types of crisis, or 'tensions', they comprise in the same literal and metaphorical *space*. Special attention will be given to those tensions that govern the relationship between culture and market and characterise this ongoing tradition of writing to Juliet, as well as to the existing social/family/individual crisis the letters themselves thematise.

The shifting relationship between mass culture and high culture is embodied within this epistolary phenomenon which finds its origin in the commodification of a literary myth, as Shakespeare's heroine is turned into an imaginary 'pen-friend' who provides fictitious answers to her numerous correspondents. All the letters collected by the Juliet Club, in fact, represent an interesting example of how popular culture re-appropriates Shakespeare's work, since they are part of those alternative narratives around his plays which have flourished independently of scholarly concerns and whose analysis may help to understand the extent to which the contents of these writings might affect, and even inflect, Shakespeare's value.

The insidious crisis thematised and dramatized in *Romeo and Juliet* has been considered, by some scholars, as mirroring a changing society undergoing contemporary social tensions.¹⁴ The years between 1594 and 1597 are often identified by historians as the sharpest flashpoint of violent tensions in class relations that affected the city of London. The London rebellions of 1595, in particular, can be considered as the most dangerous and prolonged urban uprising in England, which served as a resonant context for Shakespeare's tragedy. The play, in fact, is permeated by such a turbulence, inscribed in class antagonism, which eventually leads to the lovers' death, a tragic means meant to symbolically punish and, at the same time, expiate their fathers' guilt. But, in the play, the question of crisis is also extended to the individual who experiences a 'crisis of the self', or self-loss. Altered by some inordinate passions, in Thomas

¹⁴ Jill Levenson has highlighted the importance of violence in the drama suggesting that: "With its feud, street fight, dueling, casualties, and deployment of combat imagery, *Romeo and Juliet* offers a panoramic view [...] of violence in Elizabethan England." Jill, Levenson. "'Alla stoccado carries it away': Codes of Violence in *Romeo and Juliet*." In *Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet: Texts, Contexts, and Interpretation*. Ed. Jay L. Halio, London: Associated University Presses, 1995: 86.

Wright's words, Romeo displays symptoms of solitary melancholy¹⁵—"I have lost myself", he claims, "I am not here: This is not Romeo, he's some other where" (1: 2: 188-9). He defines love as a form of mental derangement, "a madness most discreet" (1: 2: 191), which eventually brings him, and Juliet, to a progressive emotional, spiritual and physical isolation from a community that fails to heed their cry for help.

While Romeo first displays a potentially "Black [...] humour", described by his father as "artificial" (1: 2: 132), he later discloses a fear of being defeated by the oppressive atmosphere of Veronese society, conceived as a destroying agent. *Romeo and Juliet*, in fact, can only conceptualize a place for themselves distant from the city's cultural codes.

Defiance towards an environment perceived as hostile, is a recurrent theme in Juliet's letters in which the tensions they thematise most frequently arise from the clash between ethnic groups or religions. In the corpus of letters taken into account, which cover a period between 1998 to present days, there are indeed numerous instances of letters addressing issues of conflict between families, communities and generations described as the chief enemies to the writer's love-story. A letter from a man writing from Uzbekistan complains about an arranged marriage: "Dear Juliet, right now I am with the love of my life. We have been going out secretly for three years. I have made up my mind to ask her to marry me but her parents have already fixed a marriage. Her parents will never let her agree to marry me since I don't have much money" (348/2011)¹⁶. In seeking Juliet's advice, letter-writers often refer to their story as a forbidden love confined within the social and moral boundaries of a community often exhausted by a cycle of violence, revenge, and religious tensions which mirrors to some extent those represented by the play's best-known modern musical and film adaptations. In 1960, in fact, directors began to re-elaborate the story of *Romeo and Juliet* "in order to explore social problems" (Bloom 7). *West Side Story* (1961) replaced the families' "ancient grudge" (*Prologue*, 3) with feuding gangs while Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) stressed the generation gap in the social world of the play presenting a couple unwillingly caught up in a war initiated by their parents. Later on, Buz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* (1997) updated the conflict by setting the play in what can be read as a contemporary Los Angeles or Miami, casting Shakespeare's characters into a modern urban atmosphere of frantic excess, with pounding music, drug trips, and gunfight. As for the directors' readings, the

¹⁵ In his renowned treatise *The Passions of the Minde in Generall* (1601), Thomas, Wright offered a compelling definition of the passions of the mind by underlining that they could distract and affect both body and language.

¹⁶ For each letter quoted, I report its registration number and date according to the registration system given by the Juliet Club where I personally collected all the letters.

letters sent to Juliet tend to focus on what seems particularly threatening in the modern world, addressing issues of contemporary social, religious and family conflicts.

While they recontextualize and appropriate the tensions dramatized in *Romeo and Juliet*, these narratives give voice to a cultural phenomenon which is neither English nor Italian, but global: “Dear Juliet, What do you do if you can’t love in this world full of hate? Everywhere around the world I see and hear rude and non-loving people” (1055/2010). In a similar fashion, a young man writing from Iraq expresses his complaint about the widespread violence surrounding his country and conveys his message of hope and love to Juliet, pretending to write to his beloved: “Please, tell me this will end one day, I am so lost in your love, You have come into my life and made me hope” (629/2007). For him, Juliet evokes an image of ideal love and becomes the ideal referent to whom he can overtly confess his feelings. This letter to some extent can be regarded as a ‘testamentary document’ of the conflicting love dramatized in *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*, an Arabic re-writing of the play staged at the World Shakespeare Festival a few years ago and which casts the ‘star-crossed lovers’ in a modern day Baghdad divided by Sunni and Shiite sectarian strife.

Many letters to Juliet also speak of personal crisis as symptomatic of the social and moral degeneration that afflicts contemporary life. The emotional landscape of these writings is one of deep hopelessness and psychological distress in which the play’s images of romantic fulfilment carry great importance: “Juliet, please tell me how to fill my hours of loneliness and unhappiness. Do gentlemen like Romeo still exist? Does true love still happen?” (604/2002). Similarly, a young lady declares “I feel flawed and damaged, I want to love again, Juliet. How did you know Romeo was the right one?” (1030/2007). Such instances clearly suggest that letter-writers turn Juliet into a contemporary recognizable cultural object shaped by the culture in which they are immersed. They make up Juliet’s image in a way that radically transforms her into a popular icon who can embody different ‘roles’ at once. Her reframed image becomes indeed instrumental to their needs as she can be, at the same time, the letter-writer’s unique confidant—“I have no friends, so I think I may receive an answer from distant Italy” (74/2005)—, his/her ideal guide—“Dear Juliet, you know about love and loss. [...] This is why I’m writing” (2155/2009), “Juliet, you are an example of true and sincere love” (498/2011)—or even his/her spiritual protector: “Please give your blessing on my friends’ marriage” (654/2012) or, again, “Dear Juliet, [...] I just want you to pray for my beloved husband who is very ill. I know if he has lots of prayers he will get well. Please pray” (918/2004).

In the light of such alarming claims, a sociological approach towards these writings may help to understand the overall import of this epistolary phenomenon that involves individuals of different age, social class, ethnicity and

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 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 act, 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

returned to the Club. With the letters now in the city’s possession, the staff of the cultural affair office perhaps found the way of escape from the difficult task of dealing with the letters’ controversial contents. The municipal secretaries, in fact, were instructed to write their responses by exclusively using lines from Shakespeare’s play. By contrast, the Club’s secretaries provide answers that can be, to some extent, compared to those of the ‘agony column’ in newspapers and magazines, even if they usually share letters and consult one another about their responses. Particularly troubling letters are referred to one of the Club’s volunteer, who has a background in applied psychology. All the secretaries, however, agree that “Sometimes, it is enough to be listened to, not to get practical advice. They just need to let it out, to tell their story”.¹⁷ Nevertheless, in telling their story, letter-writers occasionally ignore and even mistake the name of their addressee. Oddly enough, they refer to this epistolary practice as universally performed and thus as an efficient ‘remedy’—“Dear *Julia*, [...] When I saw the article about all these people writing to *Julia*, I decided to do it as well, Why not? Maybe she will help me?” (709/2008)—while others merely link her name to that of the invented Shakespearean site in Verona: “Dear Juliet, I fell in love with the whole idea of *Casa di Giulietta* and how millions of people write to her about love” (1340/2010).

In recent years, this letter-writing phenomenon notably increased thanks to the filmic adaptation *Letters to Juliet* (2010) which constructs its plot on the Juliet Club’s activity. It deals with the story of a young American tourist who meets the volunteers who respond to the letters and then stumbles on one such missive shoved behind a loose brick in the courtyard of Juliet’s house. She discovers that it was written by a lady more than fifty years before and expresses sorrow and regret that she left behind a handsome young Italian, Lorenzo, to return home to England. The tourist answers the letter and is stunned when the same lady arrives in Italy to find her long lost love amid the hills and villages of Tuscany.

From 2010 onwards, the same year in which the film was released, the amount of letters became increasingly numerous and writers began to refer to the film itself and its fascinating setting as the reason behind their impulse to write: “I just finished watching the movie *Letters to Juliet*. [...] I remember visiting Juliet’s balcony and the feeling of hopefulness of the future.” Both the title and conception of the film derive from this letter-writing phenomenon which is taken as a clue profitably to commodify Shakespeare’s tragedy. Gary Winick’s film, in fact, counts as an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* in a more radical sense, since, while borrowing elements of a passionate, troubled love-story and setting from Shakespeare, it nevertheless invents a new plot which represents an alternative narrative fabricated out of Shakespeare’s play. There is indeed an impulse to

¹⁷ My interview [March 2013].

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