

COLLOQUIA

# Il teatro delle emozioni: la gioia

a cura di  
Mattia De Poli

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# **Il teatro delle emozioni: la gioia**

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(Padova, 20-21 maggio 2019)*

a cura di  
Mattia De Poli

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**La gioia e l'amore**





**«It is too much of joy»:  
The Exaltation of Love in Three Shakespearean Tragedies.**

*Angela Leonardi*

ABSTRACT: Romeo and Juliet, Othello and Desdemona, Antony and Cleopatra: three memorable couples from the Shakespearean universe whose existence is brought to an end by suicide, murder, and desperation. Yet, before the tragedy, there had been the incomparable joy of feeling in love; a happiness which, in all three cases, is conveyed through precise dramatic techniques, linguistic styles oriented towards poetic exaltation, pertinent lexical choices that form veritable semantic and imaginative themes that are able to make the joyous condition of falling in love even more vivid and intense. In the case of Romeo and Juliet, the pure-hearted youths, the unstoppable force that brings them together in a sort of mutual veneration mimics the mystic joy of religious faith. The joy of love is derived from the intuition of a happiness about to arrive and their dialogues live within a dimension in which a sense of eternity becomes perceptible. As for Othello and Desdemona, the daring couple who challenged convention and authority, the path which guides them to love is paved by the zealousness and the desire to know of one who undertakes a voyage for simultaneously seductive and frightening unknown worlds. Finally, Antony and Cleopatra, in the sensuality of their mature love, embody a joy which is total and pagan. They are part of the universe, of its volatile and eternal mechanisms of creation and destruction, and their joy, in the passionate and heated disputes, is as powerful and extraordinary as the forces of nature.

Romeo and Juliet who, one after the other, take their own lives in the cold darkness of a tomb. The noble general Othello, driven mad by jealousy, who suffocates his sweet Desdemona. The formidable Cleopatra of Egypt, with the snake to her breast, awaiting death's reunion with her emperor, Antonio. It would seem without doubt utopic, given how the image of these three couples is etched into memory, to discuss them without feeling caught between Eros and Thanatos. It is the same for the other dramas of this "tragedies of love" genre – a definition in which the sorrowful connotations of the first lemma cloud the light that ought to shine from the second – whose qualification as such is

to emphasize the inescapability of a fateful destiny. Still, despite the undeniably indissoluble relation between love and pain in tragedy, we will try to level a challenge against the texts to try and separate – if only within the space of a few pages – the light moments from those of suffering and death. We will create something of a dramatic suspension in which scenic and textual sections expressing the exaltation of love can be read under the merry light of *hic et nunc*, ultimately liberating them from the bounds of thematic premonitions, proleptic symbology, and figurative materials which limit the experience of happiness in the realms of tragedy.

Let us begin, then, with *Romeo and Juliet*, and the moment in which Romeo first lays eyes on Juliet. We are at the party which takes place each year at the house of the Capulets. The words spoken by some of the characters allow us to paint a clear picture of the scene and its atmosphere: there are torches to light the room and fire to warm it; the tables are prepared and all is enlivened by music, dances, and the presence of numerous guests with Verona's most desirable ladies dazzling among them. The young Romeo and his friends, although uninvited, rush to the lure of beauty and enter – with their faces masked – the house of the Capulets. Then, late into the evening, when the light of the lamps begins to grow feeble – «More light, more light!» the master demands of his servants (I.5.86)<sup>27</sup> – and the air of the room is stuffy from the numerous guests and feverous dancing, Romeo glimpses Juliet's face. He asks a servant if he knows who this fair lady is; the servant does not. Captivated by the enchanting, unknown young woman, Romeo utters ten impromptu verses in which the hyperboles of courtship, successions of metaphors, and euphuistic conceits delicately interweave the isotopies that will underlie the privileged places of the joyful dialogues (rendering them rhetorically uniform and humouring the desire to rescue them from the tragic universe). In his verses, Romeo utilizes the most common *topoi* of Courtly Love. Nevertheless, it is immediately apparent that they are instilled with such a sense of spontaneity, an originality of combinations, and a lively rhythm, that they break out of the conventional confines of poetic standards. Thus, with the surge of nascent love, Romeo concatenates metaphors in rhyming couplets in which the first always plants the imaginary and conceptual seed of the next:

*Romeo:* O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright.  
 It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night  
 As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear,  
 Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear.  
 So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows  
 As yonder a lady o'er her fellows shows.

<sup>27</sup> SHAKESPEARE 2018a.

The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand  
 And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand.  
 Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight,  
 For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night. (I.5.43-52)

Upon hearing the sequence of rhyming couplets, the immediate perception is of a quick combination of disparate images which conveys the excitable state of the first moments of falling in love. The rhapsodic nature of the successive metaphors is, however, only superficial. Upon closer reading, one can clearly perceive a metonymic structure based on a cohesive and figurative plurality which is strictly generative. In the first verse, Juliet is an abstract source of light that teaches torches to shine brightly. The presence of the verb “to hang upon” refers to the subject in the second verse, which makes us sense that she has herself materialized into a torch, a torch which “hangs upon the cheek of night”. The metaphor attached to the personification of night bestows a synecdochical restraint upon the third verse in which the figurative device of ‘light that hangs on the night’ finds its referent realized in the “rich jewel” shining from the Ethiop’s ear. Indeed, the adjective “rich” acts like a ring of semantic conjunction in the following exclamation which connotes Juliet’s beauty as – tellingly – too “rich” for this world. Thus, a return to the heights of heaven is necessary, and Romeo achieves this through an opportune zoomorphism which transforms the girl into a white dove flying among black crows: an image in which the contrast at the heart of the protracted ‘light-dark’ isotope is reinforced with the clear chromatic opposition ‘black-white’; a contrast which, as Giorgio Melchiori has neatly put it, opens «la via a quella corrente iconica di improvvisi bagliori che squarciano le tenebre che percorre tutto il dramma»<sup>28</sup>.

At this point, satiated by the creative potential of the brightness and weary of the imagination’s limits, Romeo desires to see the girl and, above all, to touch her and put her hand in his. However, the young man – who until that moment had been infatuated with the beautiful Rosalina whose rejection of him, following the conventions of Courtly Love, had wounded him deeply – begins cautiously: he maintains a safe distance from the lady through the explicit analogy with a saint, one he can neither approach nor touch – suggestive of the *delicate* feathers of the “snowy dove” to which he had just previously compared Juliet – with a hand that he himself considers too “rude”. In order to get close to her, then, he must enter the same dimension of spirituality. Thus, he compares himself to a pilgrim that desires to kiss a holy relic. Yet, Juliet – more human than the angelic women in Petrarch or Dante – does not reject him with some

<sup>28</sup> MELCHIORI 1988, p. 222: «the way to that iconic current of sudden, intense splendour which pierces the darkness prevalent throughout the whole play».

haughty refusal.<sup>29</sup> On the contrary, the distance between the two is irrevocably bridged from the lady's first lines which demonstrate a wholesome empathy for Romeo in borrowing the same language and following him into the symbolic universe of his own creation:

*Romeo:* If I profane with my unworhiest hand  
 This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:  
 My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand  
 To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.  
*Juliet:* Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,  
 Which mannerly devotion shows in this,  
 For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,  
 And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.  
*Romeo:* Have not saints lips and holy palmers too?  
*Juliet:* Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.  
*Romeo:* O then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do –  
 They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.  
*Juliet:* Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.  
*Romeo:* Then move not while my prayer's effect I take.  
 [*Kisses her.*] (I.5.92-105)

The isotope of the pilgrim who desires to kiss the divine relic grows into a privately shared poetic space in which, in its perfect and original structure as an Elizabethan two-voiced sonnet, the miraculous fusion of the lovers' souls is realized. It is a union in which the heat of adolescent passion endures a veritable trial of sacralisation which absolves and condones the act of kissing – so feared by Romeo and Juliet as sinful – and, instead, washes away the act's original sin. The nearing of the two young lovers' internal worlds (which, at the end of the sonnet, will be total and irreversible) is further witnessed in the subdivision of the verses and in the progressive interweaving of the rhyme. In Romeo's quatrain, an ABAB rhyme is deployed that intertwines with the CBCB pattern of Juliet's quatrain. Both stanzas end with the word "kiss": a reiteration that emphasizes the specularity of their desire. In the following sestina (vv. 100-105), as testimony of their mutual veneration and their requited love, the lines are shared between the lovers. If, in Courtly poetry, the equation of a woman with a saint indicated an unbridgeable distance for an enamoured poet, and if, as Northrop Frye has suggested, the creative impulse was derived from the sexual frustration of unrequited love<sup>30</sup>, then in *Romeo and Juliet's* reciprocated love

<sup>29</sup> The only slight hesitation – perhaps self-imposed for fear of eavesdroppers – is expressed via the formal pronoun "you". She changes to the informal "thou" only when, in the balcony scene, she no longer fears being overheard by others.

<sup>30</sup> «The conventional role of the Courtly Love mistress was to be proud, disdainful and "cruel", repelling all advances from her lover. The frustration this caused drove the lover into poetry,

at first sight, the convention of saintly comparison instantly becomes a poetic game enjoyed by both, in which the creative impulse is not frustration but, rather, sexual attraction.

Finally, the sonnet's measure – which, having reached fourteen lines, should finish – expands by welcoming a further four verses (vv. 106-109) that, by their presence, grant the lovers time to kiss once more. That same night, Romeo and Juliet will meet yet again in the celebrated balcony scene. Beyond fastening the liturgy of their «religion of love»<sup>31</sup>, the two will restore – and in part perfect – the imagery of the verses they had exchanged before. Their lines will see the return of the metonyms of light, of stars, and of night illuminated by beauty; the birds, wings, flight, and focus on the hands and cheeks will all reappear. Then, in the ultimate serenity of their second encounter, away from prying eyes and ears, the two will cast off the rhetorical excesses for those which have sometimes led to Shakespeare's first masterpiece being accused of stylistic immaturity. Indeed, they are precisely these rhetorical excesses that allow us to glimpse, bit by bit, the lively process of exploration and ideation of imagery, which is an essential element in conveying the euphoria and wonder of that truly creative act of first love<sup>32</sup>.

In contrast to *Romeo and Juliet*, in *Othello* we are not witnesses of all the moments of shared happiness. Instead, we are granted the privilege of hearing Othello tell us of how he won over Desdemona. He does so in the first act's third scene, with forty verses (vv. 129-169) which are fundamental in discerning the nature of their relationship and, therefore, a necessary prolepsis of the particu-

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and the theme of the poetry was the cruelty of the mistress and the despair and supplications of the lover. It's good psychology that a creative impulse to write poetry can arise from sexual frustration, and Elizabethan poets almost invariably were or pretended to be submerged in unhappy love, and writing for that reason» (FRYE 1986, p. 20). Before laying eyes on Juliet, which is to say when he was still besotted with the 'cruel' Rosalina, Romeo had shown a similar attitude expressed in verses stemming from the frustration of his rejection.

<sup>31</sup> To borrow a definition from Paul N. Siegel's substantial essay entitled *Christianity and the Religion of Love in Romeo and Juliet*. After having illustrated the manner in which the Christian conception of love is expressed from medieval to Renaissance literature, Siegel focuses on *Romeo and Juliet*, and states: «What is in the other Elizabethan works drawn from the Italian novelle a crudely mechanical mixture of a glorification of passionate love and a Christian moralistic condemnation of it is in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* a subtle blend of these two ingredients [...]. In *Romeo and Juliet* the Medieval and Renaissance concept that sexual love is a manifestation of the cosmic love of God, which holds together the universe in a chain of love and imposes order on it, acts as a nexus between the two doctrines» (SIEGEL 1961, p. 372).

<sup>32</sup> Regarding the rhetorical excesses in *Romeo and Juliet*, it is interesting to note Frank Kermode's affirmation: «There are many rhetorical levels, abuses of rhetoric, and clashes of style in the play, but they are all set off by [the] use of the plainest possible style, itself a great rhetorical achievement. *Romeo and Juliet* may be the most popular of the tragedies, though few would include it among the greatest. It is nevertheless a masterpiece, the virtuosities of the language matched by the subtlety of the plotting» (KERMODE 2000, p. 58).

lar circumstances in which the lovers will express, on stage, the reciprocal joy in an enraptured exchange of verses and kisses. Othello begins by establishing that senator Brabantio, Desdemona's father, would frequently invite him over to hear him narrate tales from his life of soldiering and adventure. Then, from v. 135, Othello constructs 'a tale within a tale' with a rhetorically seductive force that captivates whosoever stops to listen. Through skilled use of assonance, alliteration, anaphors, hyperbole, postponement, and a sprinkling of cultured and exotic vocabulary, verses that conjure disturbing scenes of distant worlds and monstrous creatures are formed. Then, ten verses on, just as the narration is reaching the peak of its attractive powers, it is interrupted. The verse is broken by a full stop and the second hemistich, still shorter, redirects the narrative focus back to Brabantio's house and, in particular, to the privileged bystander that is Desdemona, which demonstrates a passionate desire to continue listening:

*Othello:* [...]
   
And of the cannibals that each other eat,
   
The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
   
Do grow beneath their shoulders. This to hear
   
Would Desdemona seriously incline,
   
But still the house affairs would draw her thence,
   
Which ever as she could with haste dispatch
   
She'd come again, and with a greedy ear
   
Devour up my discourse; [...] (I.3.144-151)<sup>33</sup>

Moving along the boundary between the real and the fanciful with the mastery of an epic poet, Othello depicts a proud imagine of himself; this identity is affirmed and fulfilled by Desdemona's enchanted gaze. For the young lady, his stories are at the heart of an extraordinary cosmos that hypnotizes and attracts her. The lines which suggest impatience («which ever as she could with haste dispatch / She'd come again [...]»), the presence of lemmas which underpin the desire to know the other with sensory fulfilment («[...] and with a greedy ear / devour up my discourse [...]»), the hints of tears and sighs: all elements which, in describing how Desdemona responds to hearing Othello's words, reveal all its expansive vivacity.

During the second act, Othello returns victorious from the war against the Turks. Here, despite the call of trumpets and his superiors waiting to greet his triumphant return, he goes straight to Desdemona who, to his mind, renders the affairs of state trivial. Now the war is merely a useful theme to inspire words of praise for his lady: «O my fair warrior!» (II.1.179) he will in fact call her before commencing a tumultuous speech in which hyperbolic dichotomies

<sup>33</sup> SHAKESPEARE 2006.

of the momentum of absolute passion are outlined (vv. 181-191). To stem the overflowing of Othello's joy into painful thoughts, the words of Desdemona come quickly to his aid and reassure him of a love that grows with the passing of time: «The heavens forbid / But that our loves and comforts should increase / Even as our days do grow» (vv. 191-193). At the sound of his beloved's voice, Othello senses the extasy of the infinite, the tension towards an immense happiness that words could not hope to capture: «Amen to that, sweet powers! / I cannot speak enough of this content, / It stops me here, it is too much of joy» (vv. 193-195). To compensate for the shortcomings of language and its inability to stand between the two souls, the sudden impulse for bodily contact fills the void: «And this, and this the greatest discords be (*They kiss*) / That e'er our hearts shall make» (vv. 196-197). The double deictic (“*this*, and *this*”) and the caption indicate that, at this point, Othello kisses Desdemona: a gesture which seems to want to encapsulate, as if within a box, a feeling far too vast to be demonstrated in a theatrical scene, where the poetic intensity of the verses would lead to exuberant overacting and risk demeaning, rather than glorifying, the nature of joyful outbursts.

This overwhelming happiness, which merely performative devices cannot express, instead finds its proper place within the vocal and orchestral domains of opera. Indeed, in Verdi's masterpiece, the happiness between Othello and Desdemona is superbly brought to life in a duet which, as Spike Hughes has observed, sounds like «a ribbon of exquisite melodies that wander through the most unlikely tones in the most unsuspected – but incontrovertibly logical – way»<sup>34</sup>. During a significant time of increasing intimacy (10.47 minutes), the duet *Già nella notte densa* (Act I, Scene 3) blends together the two scenic sections that we have just considered. Yet, Boito's lyrics want the poignant memory of their falling in love to come from both voices. Othello's protracted opening, in a G flat which conveys a sublime serenity of the soul, is followed by Desdemona's languid, melodic beats that reevoke, in emotional passages, the «soavi abbracciamenti» (“sweet embraces”) and the joys of «mormorare insieme» (“murmuring together”).<sup>35</sup> The shared memory of alternating voices continues until the final cabaletta which sees the two verses spoken by Shakespeare's Othello («She loved me for the dangers I had passed / And I loved her that she did pity them», vv. 168-169) multiply into eight beats which replicate – with appropriate pronominal modifications essential to the sentimental symmetry – the same line a

<sup>34</sup> HUGHES 1968, p. 440.

<sup>35</sup> «La reazione empatica di Desdemona al racconto espande il testo shakespeariano in un tripudio di sospiri, baci e gemiti sulla scorta del semplice “She gave me for my pains a world of sighs”» (CORONATO 2017, p. 312: “Desdemona's empathetic reaction to the story expands the Shakespearean text into a blaze of sighs, kisses and groans based on the simple ‘She gave me for my pains a world of sighs’”).



good seven times; and, for a good seven times, a verb is echoed with a tireless refraction of effect: «amare» (“to love”).

*Otello*: E tu m’amavi per le mie sventure  
 (“And you loved me for the dangers I had passed”)

Ed io t’amavo per la tua pietà  
 (“And I loved you that you did pity them”).

*Desdemona*: Ed io t’amavo per le tue sventure  
 (“And I loved you for the dangers you had passed”)

E tu m’amavi per la mia pietà  
 (“And you loved me that I did pity them”).

*Otello*: E tu m’amavi...  
 (“And you loved me...”).

*Desdemona*: E tu m’amavi...  
 (“And you loved me...”).

*Otello*: Ed io t’amavo...  
 (“And I loved you...”).

*Otello e Desdemona*: ...per la tua (mia) pietà  
 (“...that you / I did pity them”).

Finally, let us turn to *Antony and Cleopatra*. Here, the protagonists, in the bliss of their mature love, embody a pagan and total happiness. They are part of the universe, of its volatile and eternal mechanisms of creation and destruction and, in heated and passionate exchanges, their joy is as powerful and extraordinary as the forces of nature. At the opening of the tragedy, our attention is immediately directed towards the two lovers who are caught up in the midst of one of their passionate skirmishes. At Cleopatra’s demand to express the extent of his love for her, Antony does not allow himself to be muted by the emotion of too much joy (as had happened to Othello) and instead responds with hyperbole which projects them into the immense dimension of the Book of Revelation:

*Cleopatra*: If it be love indeed, tell me how much.

*Antonio*: There’s beggary in the love that can be reckoned.

*Cleopatra*: I’ll set a bourn how far to be beloved.

*Antonio*: Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth. (I.1.14-17)<sup>36</sup>

In this opening syllogism, the intellectual energy and imaginative range that will define the imagery of the whole drama are already recognizable. When, for example, Antony returns victorious to Alexandria (IV.8), he again allows himself to draw inspiration – through hyperbole – from this cosmological vastness. Although he does not see Cleopatra right away<sup>37</sup>, his first thought turns to her:

<sup>36</sup> SHAKESPEARE 2018b.

<sup>37</sup> While Desdemona is the first to welcome Othello upon his triumphant return, Cleopatra keeps Antony waiting some time in order to make more of a spectacle of her entrance.

«We have beat him to his camp. Run one before / And let the Queen know of our gests» (IV.8.1-2). He turns his attention, for a moment, to his soldiers, praising their courage in battle and encouraging them to embrace their wives. Then, Cleopatra makes her entrance. Upon seeing her, Antony eulogizes her by compressing and exalting, in the brief space of a hemistich, the same isotope that Romeo had chased, verse upon verse, at the sight of Juliet: «[...] O thou day o'th' world» (13). It is here, in the dazzling light of this image, that Antony delivers verses of heightened sensuality which demonstrate his overwhelming desire to unite himself with Cleopatra in a single, ecstatic entity:

*Antony:* [...]
   
Chain mine armed neck! Leap thou, attire and all,
   
Through proof of harness to my heart, and there
   
Ride on the pants triumphing!
   
[*They embrace.*] (IV.8.14-16)

In enticing the Queen of Egypt towards him, Antony uses verses which denote vigorous action: he desires that Cleopatra *chain* his armoured neck, *leap* upon him, and *ride* his heart. If the use of the verb “to chain” suggests a desire for submission, the desire for Cleopatra to leap upon him “attire and all” adds to the shade of eroticism, above all in joining the phrase “through proof of harness” which, even before clarifying its relation to the heart, is suggestive of nudity. The image concludes with Cleopatra landing on Antony’s panting heart, which he visualizes as a “triumphal chariot”<sup>38</sup>, whereupon she will jubilantly ride his heartbeats: a sublime hypostasis that unites the joy of souls with the pleasure of bodies in one sumptuous and all-encompassing movement. At the same time, the concluding verses allow for the lovers’ projection into an intimate and secret dimension because it is sheltered within Antony’s chest. Escaped, as Cleopatra says, from «the world’s great snare» (v. 18), a smiling and infinitely virtuous Antony enters into that hidden dimension; a world in which he can share, with his beloved, incomparable joy. Theirs is a world above earthly affairs and petty human troubles, before which – as Antony declares in some of his most celebrated verses which are practically an epitaph of the play – Rome can dissolve in the Tiber, the empire can crumble to ruin, and all other kingdoms are as nothing more than clay<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> In the Arden Shakespeare edition (SHAKESPEARE 2018b), John Wilders explains: «‘pants triumphing’: ‘triumphantly on my panting breast’. Antony visualizes his heart as a triumphal chariot in which Cleopatra will ride. Case notes that this passage was imitated by Fletcher in *The False One* 4.2.126, where Caesar says to Cleopatra, ‘My heart shall be the Chariot that shall bear ye’» (p. 243).

<sup>39</sup> *Antony:* «Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch / Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space! Kindoms are clay! [...]» (I.1.34-36).

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ἔφριξ' ἔρωτι, περιχαρῆς δ' ἀνεπτάμαν  
Che brivido di piacere! Che gioia straordinaria! Spicco il volo.  
(Sofocle, *Aiace* 693)

Questo volume raccoglie gli interventi presentati al 2° Convegno internazionale "Il teatro delle emozioni - La gioia" (Università degli Studi di Padova, palazzo del Bo', aula I. Nieve, 20-21 maggio 2019). I diversi contributi mostrano la "teatralità" della gioia, ovvero la possibilità di rappresentare questa emozione sulla scena, negli spettacoli sia tragici che comici, e sono stati organizzati in quattro sezioni per affinità tematica ("La gioia fra tragedia e commedia", "La gioia e l'amore", "Realtà, illusione, apparenza, finzione", "Teatro e società") e secondo un ordine cronologico all'interno di ciascuna di esse: si è inteso cercare così un equilibrio fra l'approccio che intende le emozioni come il prodotto particolare di una società, legato ad un tempo e un luogo ben precisi, e quello che le intende come l'espressione universale di qualcosa di innato, di intrinsecamente umano, indipendente da qualsiasi condizionamento esterno all'individuo.

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