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Shakespeare and the Mediterranean • 1

Romeo and Juliet

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi and Emanuel Stelzer



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Reimagining Friar Laurence: from Circum-Mediterranean Novellas to the Shakespearean Stage

SILVIA SILVESTRI

Abstract

This essay aims at shedding light on the circum-Mediterranean reshaping of Friar Laurence, a representative of the Franciscan order whose figure famously migrated into Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* via Arthur Brooke's *Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* (1562), Pierre Boaistuau's *Histoires Tragiques* (1559), Matteo Bandello's *Romeo e Giuletta* (1554), and Luigi Da Porto's *Historia de due nobili amanti* (1530 ca.). Largely bearing upon recent debates on source study, specifically on the reconceptualisation of linear transmission as a dynamic process of intercultural, interdiscursive, and contextual influence, the essay re-examines Shakespeare's portrayal of the friar in view of the stratified narrative renditions present in *Romeo and Juliet's* source chain, situating its cross-cultural transformation within the historical, discursive, and literary framework of the early-sixteenth-century Mediterranean region. Such palimpsestic readings are analysed in the light of the authors' biographies and cross-referenced with a relevant set of "imported" foreign practices and 'translated' discourses" (Vitkus 2003, 13) that came to be intertwined with the Romeo and Juliet story during its circum-Mediterranean migration. The aim is to identify the different stages of Friar Laurence's transformation from Da Porto's self-serving hypocrite to Brooke's ambivalent helper, shedding light on how, why, and under what circumstances such variations took place.

KEYWORDS: *Romeo and Juliet*; Friar Laurence; source studies; intertextuality; novellas

Bearing upon recent methodological and theoretical reorientations in source studies, specifically on the reconceptualisation of linear transmission as a dynamic process of intercultural, interdiscursive, and contextual influence (cf. Lynch 1998; Clare 2014; Britton and Walter 2018; Bigliuzzi 2018; Drakakis 2021), this essay explores the web of intertextual, intercultural, and interdiscursive influences at the basis of *Romeo and Juliet*, focusing in particular on the ambiguous characterisation of Friar Laurence, a Franciscan religious whose figure famously migrated into Shakespeare's play via Arthur Brooke's *Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* (1562), Pierre Boaistuau's *Histoires Tragiques* (1559), Matteo Bandello's *Romeo e Giuletta* (1554), and Luigi Da Porto's *Historia de due nobili amanti* (1530 ca.). Critical discourse has often credited Shakespeare with the redefinition of this character, allegedly achieved through the elimination of "the polemical subtext that inflects all of Laurence's previous portraits" (Salter 2008, 67). According to these readings, Shakespeare's religious "inhabits and redirects the stereotypes of the lecherous and politically motivated friar" (Woods 2013, 115) prevalent in early modern culture, providing an "undersong counselling temperance and reason" (Blakemore Evans 2003, 16) to the chaos of passions that dominates the play. He has thus been framed as "benevolent and civic-minded" (Matusiak 2014, 211), his conduct "blameless" (Weis 2012, 46). These benign interpretations, nevertheless, have not gone unchallenged. Already in 1958, Robert Stevenson called attention to Shakespeare's "extremely unsatisfactory" and "unchurchly" depiction of Laurence, deeming him an unfit moral guide (Stevenson 1958, 36, 42). More recent scholarship has further elaborated on this point, bringing to the fore the friar's ill-concealed political ambition (Brenner 1980), his problematic dramatic function (Bryant 1993) and "fallibly human" nature (Blakemore Evans 2003, 25). In an attempt to reconcile such contradictory stances, Kenneth Colston has proposed to link Laurence's "duplicitousness" to his preoccupation with "the good of souls brought to his care" (Colston 2015, 20): a selfless concern that, he maintains, would compensate for his transgressive behaviour and questionable decisions. New trends in source study bring another possibility to the table: could the reasons for Laurence's ambiguity be sought in the stratified "story-line" Shakespeare inherited

rather than in his later “treatment of the character” (Blakemore Evans 2003, 23)? In other words: was the friar’s duplicitous role and personality wholly Shakespeare’s invention? Or were the seeds of his ambivalence already there, planted during the story’s circum-Mediterranean circulation and ready to germinate on the Elizabethan stage, under Shakespeare’s care?

To tackle this issue, in what follows I will examine the cross-cultural reshaping of Friar Laurence, comparing selected extracts of the novella tradition in order to highlight the continuities and subtle variations that mark the character’s ambiguous treatment along the lines of his intertextual transmission. A fluid “space of cultural hybridity, liminality and transformation” (Schülting 2019) defined by “the movement of ideas and religions” (Abulaifa 2003, 13) across different territories, the early modern Mediterranean region¹ created the perfect conditions for the realisation of such exchanges, allowing for the circulation of people and texts as well as “‘imported’ foreign practices and ‘translated’ discourses” (Vitkus 2003, 13) that came to be intertwined with the Romeo and Juliet story during its transnational migration. The palimpsestic renditions (cf. Bigliuzzi 2018) that resulted from such multilayered interactions will be read in the light of the authors’ biographies and cross-referenced with the cultural and interdiscursive material available at the time of each novella’s composition. The aim is to identify the different stages of Friar Laurence’s transformation from Da Porto’s self-serving hypocrite to Brooke’s ambivalent helper, shedding light on how, why, and under what circumstances such a transformation took place. The resulting inquiry will help to clarify which textual, cultural, and interdiscursive material inflected the religious portrayals featured in Shakespeare’s source chain, ultimately testing the potential of a more dynamic and comprehensive research into the dramatist’s working practices and

¹ To quote David Abulaifa, the question of what the Mediterranean region is “does not admit straightforward answers” (2003, 11). For the purposes of this study, I will focus on the early modern “civilizations . . . that have emerged along” the coasts of the Great Sea (Abulaifa 2003: 11), paying attention to the circulation of ideas, discourses, and stories allowed by the cultural and religious encounters between different “Mediterranean countries” (de Sousa 2018, 140), particularly Italy and France.

inviting further reflection on the complex, multilayered nature of his source material.

As is well-known, *Romeo and Juliet*'s principal source has long been identified in Arthur Brooke's *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*, a verbose poem in poulter's measure first published in 1562 and reprinted in 1587. If "verbal echoes" of this work resound clearly "throughout the play" (Blakemore Evans 2003, 7), making its genetic relation to Shakespeare rather uncontroversial, inner textual symmetries suggest that the playwright was also familiar with William Painter's later version of the same story, harboured in the twenty-fifth novella in the second volume of *Palace of Pleasure (Rhomeo and Julietta, 1567)*. Vice versa, there is no substantial evidence to confirm Shakespeare's first-hand knowledge of the earlier versions of the tale, elaborated across the Continent throughout the sixteenth century: the third story of Pierre Boaistuau's *Histoires Tragiques* (1559), a French translation on which both Brooke and Painter had based their retellings; Boaistuau's direct source, i.e., the ninth tale in the second volume of Matteo Bandello's *Novelle*, entitled *La sfortunata morte di dui infelicissimi amanti* (1554); and Luigi Da Porto's *Istoria novellamente ritrovata de due nobili amanti* (1530 ca.), which served as a model for Bandello. The latter is also the first version to feature "all the focal points which rendered *Romeo and Juliet* so famous" (Perocco 2018, 42), including the presence of a Franciscan friar who functions as "an indispensable cog" (Weis in Shakespeare 2012, 31) in all subsequent iterations: Friar Laurence.

Presented to Da Porto's readers as Romeo and Giulietta's ally, the religious is a crucial enabler of their ill-fated love. He is a respected citizen in Verona and therefore enjoys the confidence of the lovers and is trusted by their feuding families; he blesses the youths' union in the secrecy of his confessional and keeps in contact with Romeo when he is exiled to Mantua; moreover, being "isperimentatore di molte cose così naturali come magiche" ("experimenter in several natural and supernatural matters", B1v),² he is also the one who

² Quotations from the Italian text from Da Porto 2022 (page numbers refer to the diplomatic edition); the English translation comes from Prustner 2000.

provides Giulietta with the infamous sleeping potion, inadvertently precipitating the events towards catastrophe.³ The intermediary function he thus fulfils would set him up as “a figure who inspires confidence and trust” (Salter 2008, 65) – a disinterested friend who supports the lovers’ relationship up to its extreme consequences. Yet, a closer reading into Da Porto evokes a quite different image of Lorenzo, revealing that his actions are never devoid of self-serving purposes. He shares “tanta stretta amistà con Romeo . . . che la più forse in que’ tempi tra due in molti loci non si saria trovata” (B1v, “such close friendship with Romeo . . . that it would have been difficult at that time to find two closer friends anywhere”), but such an intimate relationship is the result of a clever calculation on Lorenzo’s part: “*gli era convenuto per forza*”, the narrative voice underlines, “d’alcun gentiluomo della città fidarsi” (B2r, “*it had been in his best interests to take several of the city’s noblemen in his confidence*”; my emphasis), for this was the only way to “in bona oppenione del suo volgo restare, e di qualche suo diletto godere” (B1v-B2r, “remain in the good graces of his flock and indulge in some of his pleasures”; my emphasis). His preoccupation with himself is also the main reason for his involvement with the secret

³ The same characteristics are present, though *in nuce*, in the thirty-third novella of Masuccio Salernitano’s *Novellino* (1476), a short story which Da Porto is believed to have looked up to for the main themes of his novella. Centered on the unhappy vicissitudes of Mariotto and Giannoza, this story differs from Da Porto’s in many crucial respects: it is set in Siena, and not Verona; the lovers bear different names; their families are not at war with one another, and they do not die in each other’s arms. Yet its unravelling is aided by a crafty unnamed friar who joins the couple in a clandestine marriage, provides Giannoza with a drug to help her feign her death and avoid an unwanted suitor, and ultimately delivers her from the tomb where she lies. Though not a Franciscan, this religious belongs to a mendicant order (Masuccio labels him as a “frate augustinense”, “Augustinian friar”, Masuccio 1476) and fulfills the same narrative function which would be assigned to his European successors: he is a go-between who validates and facilitates the lovers’ relationship. But, unlike Lorenzo, he has no personal ties with Mariotto and Giannoza: he is but casually asked to officiate the wedding, and he does so only for material gain (“per dare al fatto con opera compimento, corrotto per denari un frate augustiniense . . .”, Masuccio 1476; “in order to bring this about, they bribed an Augustinian friar . . .”).

wedding, which he agrees to officiate “perché a Romeo niuna cosa aria *senza suo gran danno* potuta negare” (B2r, “because he could deny Romeo nothing *without bringing serious harm upon himself*”; my emphasis). The prospect of gaining “molto onore” (B2r, “much honour”) for his role in the possible reconciliation of the two households is also a welcomed side-effect of the plan. By the same token, when a deserted Giulietta threatens suicide to escape her upcoming wedding with the count of Lodrone, Lorenzo offers his assistance because he fears Romeo’s retribution and the scandal in which he would be implicated if the affair were disclosed.⁴ His *protégés’* well-being is but a means to his own selfish ends.

The mixture of opportunism and sycophancy that defines the friar is further underlined in the follow-up of the story, when Giulietta awakes from her drug-induced sleep in the dark of the Capulet crypt and finds herself wrapped in an unwelcomed embrace. Tellingly, the first thought that crosses her mind is that Lorenzo has taken advantage of her slumber: “oimè ove sono? Che mi strigne? Misera me, chi me bascia?” e, credendo che questo frate Lorenzo fusse, gridò ‘A questo modo Frate serbate la fede a Romeo? A questo modo mi conducete sicura?’” (D1v, “Alas, where am I? Who is holding me? Wretch that I am, who is kissing me?” and believing friar Lorenzo responsible, she cried: ‘is this how you show your loyalty to Romeo, friar? Is this how you intend leading me to safety?’). The misgiving is unfounded – it is her dying lover who is lying next to her – but her doubts are enough to cast another dark shadow over the friar, implying that she believes him capable of sexual misconduct.

A few lines later, a similar lack of trust in the friar’s integrity is displayed by the town’s watchmen. As soon as they see Lorenzo and his “fidato compagno” (D3r, “trusted friend”) standing next to the open crypt, they wonder whether they are there to perform “qualche malia” (D5r, “some spell”). When the friar refuses to answer their questions, their chief goes on to observe that “se non

4 “Frate Lorenzo udendo l’animo di costei tale essere, e pensando egli quanto nelle mani di Romeo ancor fosse, il qual senza dubbio nemico gli diverria, se a questo caso non provedesse, alla giovane così disse . . .” (C1v, “Frate Lorenzo, hearing her determination and thinking to what extent he was still bound to Romeo who would undoubtedly become his enemy if he did not take care of this matter, spoke thus to the maiden . . .”).

che io conosco voi Frate Lorenzo uomo di bona condizione, io direi, che spogliare gli morti foste qui venuti” (D5v, “if I did not know you for a man of good standing, friar Lorenzo, I would say you had come here to rob the dead”). Here again, Lorenzo is subtly accused of two serious offences – the practice of necromancy and the desecration of the Capulet grave – but his good name prevents him from being openly charged with such crimes. At the end of the novella his position is partially redeemed, as, crying “dal dolore fino nel core passato, sopra e’ morti amanti” (D5r, “weeping over the dead lovers from heart-felt grieve”), he contributes to dispelling the families’ grudge by recounting their unhappy fate. But even this last deed is neither disinterested nor spontaneous: Lorenzo breaks his oath and confesses only when a complaint issued by “molti frati, i quali male gli voleano” (D6v, “many friars who wished him harm”) puts his reputation on the line, thereby offering yet another clue to his deceiving nature and unpopularity amongst the members of his own Order. The earliest antecedent to Shakespeare’s friar is then an equivocal go-between, a figure of questionable moral integrity who acts mainly for his own benefit.

This is the legacy Bandello received and fully accepted. In his *sfortunata morte*, the soon-to-be Bishop of Agen does not shy away from controversy: not only does he take up the mixture of opportunism and pent-up lechery that had coloured his source, but he also accentuates some of Lorenzo’s most questionable traits, including his self-serving agenda and potential lasciviousness. This is particularly evident in the character’s presentation, which Bandello alters by expanding the narrator’s commentary on the friar’s true motives: “voleva il buon frate mantenersi in buona opinione del volgo, ed anche goder di quei dilette che gli capevano nella mente, si sforzava far i fatti suoi più cautamente che poteva, e per ogni caso che potesse occorrere, cercava sempre appoggiarsi ad alcuna persona nobile e di riputazione” (49r, “the good friar wished to remain in the good graces of the common people while still indulging in his chosen pursuits, he made every effort to go about his business as discreetly as possible, always seeking the support of some esteemed noble person”).⁵ Acting perfectly in character, a few

⁵ Quotations are from Bandello 2022; the English translation is once again from Prustner.

lines later Lorenzo agrees to assist Romeo and Giulietta both because he is in no position to deny the boy any favour,⁶ and because he hopes to “acquistarsi di più in più la grazia del signor Bartolomeo” (49r, “ingratiat[e] himself even more with Lord Bartolomeo”) by playing a role in the appeasement of the Montague-Capulet feud. The lovers’ happiness and the wider civic good their marriage could do are again merely collateral to his personal gain, which is all that really counts for him.

Further developing the line initiated by Da Porto, Bandello aggravates the circumstances of Giulietta’s awakening in the crypt. The girl regains conscience “sentendosi baciare” (“feeling herself kissed”) and wonders whether “il frate venuto per levarla, o averla a portar in camera, la tenesse in braccio e, incitato dal concupiscibile appetito, la baciasse” (61r, “the friar, come to wake her up or take her to the room, was holding her in his arms and kissing her, excited by his concupiscible passions”). The accusation is again debunked in the follow-up of the story, but the link thus established between the friar’s assumed misconduct and the desire aroused by the contact with Giulietta’s body worsens our impression of Lorenzo, bringing him closer – at least in the reader’s imagination – to the lecherous priests that crowd the pages of Renaissance novellas. We shall return to this point, but, for the time being, let us just remark that Bandello follows Da Porto quite closely in the characterisation of the Franciscan, occasionally sharpening the disparaging portrait found in his source to foreground the friar’s ambiguity and untrustworthiness. At the same time, Bandello curiously expunges all references to Lorenzo’s possible necromantic practices and troubling last confession, two elements that resurface, albeit with different connotations, in Boaistuau’s *Histoires Tragiques*.

The frontispiece frames such stories as “extraites des oeuvres italiennes de Bandel” (“taken from the Italian works of Bandello”),⁷ who, at that time, enjoyed a significant reputation in France both as a writer and the *ad interim* Bishop of Agen (1550-1555). Boaistuau

6 “A quello non poteva cosa veruna negare” (49r, “he could deny him nothing”).

7 Quotations are from Boaistuau 2022; the English translations is from Prustner 2000.

likely meant to exploit this popularity to recover from the debacle of his edition of the *Heptameron*, published under the title of *Histoires des amans fortunez* in 1558 and immediately suppressed on account of his invasive textual manipulations (see Virtue 1998). Apart from a chance for public redemption, the *Novelle* might have caught Boaistuau's attention for "the strangeness of the intrigue and the horror of the conclusion",⁸ two elements that served well the narration of the *miseria homini* that, around those years, was at the core of Boaistuau's production.⁹ Inner textual crosschecks, however, cannot rule out the possibility that the French author knew Da Porto's earlier version as well, from which he might have borrowed "many a detail" (Sturiel 1918, 8; cf. Moore 1929) expunged in *Bandello*. The issue remains contentious due to the vagueness and possible accidentality of the symmetries singled out to support it.¹⁰ That said, some of the passages related to the friar's storyline – namely the sequences concerning the finding of the lovers' corpses and the last public disclosure of their affair – offer an interesting standpoint from which to look at this question.

Swerving from the Italian line, Boaistuau fleshes out a rather sympathetic friar figure in his adaptation, stripping Lorenzo (or better, Laurent) of the moral ambiguity he had been burdened with. The 'Frenched' Franciscan is still a "Docteur en Théologie, merveilleusement bien versé en Philosophie, et grand scrutateur des secrets de nature" (49v, "Doctor of Theology, wondrously versed in Philosophy and a great investigator of the secrets of nature"), but it is his mild temperament, "sa prud'homie et bonté" (49v, "his integrity and goodness") rather than his political cunning that have so won him the heart of the citizens of Verona:

Il les oyait presque tous en confession, et n'y avait celui depuis les petits jusques aux grands, qui ne le révêrât et aimât, et même le plus souvent par sa grande prudence, était quelquefois appelé aux plus

8 Sturiel 1918, 6. See also Menetti 2005, 59 on the noir and grotesque qualities of the *Novelle*.

9 The reference here is to both his *Théâtre du Monde* (1558) and the collection of the *Histoires Prodigieuses* (1561). See for instance Ménager 2021 and Lestringant 2021.

10 On the topic, see Carr 1977, 33; Sturiel 1918, 8-9; Marfè 2015, 54.

étroits affaires des seigneurs de la ville. . . . Le jeune Roméo (comme avons jà dit) dès son jeune âge avait toujours eu je ne sais quelle particulière amitié avecques frère Laurent, et lui communiquait ses secrets. (49v-50r)

[He heard the confession of almost all of them; and there was no one, young or old, who did not revere and love him; because of his great discretion, he was even summoned as often as not to take part in the most private dealings of the city's lords. . . . The young Roméo (as we have already said) had always had from a very tender age I know not what particular friendship with friar Laurens, and told him all his secrets.]

Here Boaistuau reverses the cause-effect relations established by Da Porto and reinforced by Bandello. His Laurent does not act out of a wish for recognition or preferment, nor does he exploit his parishioners' faith for his own ends. On the contrary, he is spontaneously loved, respected, and sought after by the Veronese *élite* for his wisdom and kind disposition. These qualities make it unsurprising for Rhoméo to have chosen him as a spiritual guide and confidant, forging a "particulière amitié" ("particular friendship") that, this time around, is reciprocated without further motives. Their friendship is indeed so close as to resemble a father-son bond, an element Boaistuau introduces by underlining Laurent's paternal affection for Rhoméo¹¹ and establishing a considerable age difference between them. If the boy is described as young and beautiful in the Italian novellas and a "jeune enfant" (40v, "young boy") in Boaistuau, it is only in the latter that the friar is explicitly qualified as "ancien" (49v, "aged") or, in a less polite formulation, "sur le bord de la fosse" (68v, "close to the grave") – an interpolation that adds to the moral authority and fatherly attitude he displays throughout the narrative.

It is on this positive note that Laurent's characterisation develops. He marries the two lovers because he cares for Rhoméo and hopes to favour civic harmony.¹² When Juliette informs him

¹¹ "Je l'ai aussi cher que si je l'avais engendré" (67v, "I love him as dearly as if he were my own son").

¹² "Vaincu par sa [de Roméo] pertinacité, et aussi projetant en lui-même que ce mariage serait (peut-être) moyen de réconcilier ces deux lignées"

of the imposed match with Pâris, he quickly resolves to help her “vaincu de pitié, et avisa qu’il aimait mieux hasarder son honneur, que de souffrir l’adultère de Pâris avec Juliette” (67v, “won over by pity and decided that he would rather risk *his good name* than suffer Pâris’s adultery with Juliette”; my emphasis). As the repeated use of the participle “vaincu” (“won”) reveals, Laurent has been wrestling with his conscience to send the youths down a righteous path and, even when won by their insistence, he keeps placing their salvation above his reputation. Unlike his predecessors, he is but briefly troubled by fears for himself: “si elle [Juliette] défailloit en quelque chose, tout leur fait serait divulgué, lui diffamé, et Roméo son epoux puni” (67r-v, “if she failed in something, their whole venture would be disclosed, his reputation compromised and Roméo, her husband, punished”), he thinks to himself, expressing a selfless concern that had never affected Da Porto’s or Bandello’s friar. Whereas Lorenzo’s actions are prompted by his will to avoid retaliation and public shaming, Laurent is prodded only by his own guilty conscience and the love he bears for the young Montague.

Such stark differences in characterisation come even more prominently to the fore with regards to Laurent’s involvement with magic. At various stages in their narratives, Da Porto, Bandello, and Boastuau acknowledge the friar’s magical expertise, arguably because this aspect is essential to his role in Giulietta/Juliette’s pretended death. As noted above, Da Porto goes so far as to indirectly associate the friar with necromancy – a passing accusation Bandello does away with but Boastuau reinstates, though in a slightly different narrative configuration. While introducing Laurent, the French writer comments on his occultist interests, except that he then points out that he mingles with arcane sciences with moderation, thus preserving his good name (he is “renommé d’avoir intelligence de la Magie et des autres sciences cachées et occultes, ce qui ne diminuait en rien sa réputation, car il n’en abusait point”, 49v; “famed for having knowledge of Magic and of other hidden and occult sciences. This to no extent detracted from his reputation, for he did not abuse

(50r, “won over by his determination and foreseeing as well that his marriage would perhaps be the means by which these two family lines were reconciled”).

his knowledge at all.”). Perhaps it is because of this commendable self-restraint that, later on in the *histoire*, the watchmen do not relate their suspicions of necromancy (which they state, nonetheless) to the presence of Laurent and Pierre in the Capulet tomb:

Les gardes de la ville passaient fortuitement par là auprès, lesquels avisant la clarté en ce tombeau, soupçonnèrent incontinent que c'étaient Nécromanciens, qui avaient ouvert ce sépulcre, pour abuser des corps morts, et s'en aider en leur art. Et curieux de savoir ce qui en était, entrèrent au cercueil, où ils trouvèrent Roméo et Juliette . . . Et lors tous étonnés, cherchèrent tant çà et là, pour surprendre ceux qu'ils pensaient avoir fait le meurtre, qu'ils trouvèrent enfin le beau père frère Laurent, et Pierre, serviteur du défunt Roméo, (qui s'étaient cachés sous un étai). (80v)

[The guards of the city happened to be passing nearby and seeing light in the tomb, they immediately suspected that necromancers had opened the tomb to desecrate the corpses and make use of their art. And, curious to learn what was going on, they went down into the vault, where they found Roméo and Juliette . . . And then all astonished, they searched so thoroughly for those they thought had committed the murder that at last they found the good father Friar Laurent and Pierre, servant of the dead Roméo, who had hidden themselves under a stall].

Boaistuau seems to retrieve Da Porto's hint at the hypothetical “malia” (“spell”) performed on the grave, elaborating on the indirect accusation presented in the earlier text: at the sight of the lit crypt the Italian watchmen ask if the friars are there to perform some sort of spell; their French counterpart, instead, explicitly refer to the intrusion of some “Nécromanciens” (“Necromancers”) and comment on their possible actions and motives (“. . . avaient ouvert ce sépulcre, pour abuser des corps morts, et s'en aider en leur art”, 80v; “. . . had opened the tomb to desecrate their corpses and make use of their art”).¹³ But, unlike Da Porto, Boaistuau goes on

¹³ It is worth remarking that necromancers were extremely popular characters in French and Italian literature and drama throughout the Renaissance, a fact that might account for Boaistuau's passing allusion to them in his *histoire*. For a survey of these characters' presence in sixteenth-century literary production see, for instance, Bettoni 2016.

to free the name of the friar from the allegation: as soon as they spot Rhoméo's and Juliette's corpses and Pierre and Laurent hiding underneath a stall "avec quelques ferrements" (81r, "with some iron tools"), the guards apprehend them as suspected murderers. No further allusion to desecrating rites is made in Laurent's presence, as if his character were incompatible with such accusations.

For seemingly symmetrical reasons, Boaistuau erases all references to Juliet's suspicions about Laurent's conduct, relegating all lustful fancies to the friar's past. "Je dois désormais avoir plus grande appréhension des jugements de Dieu, que lorsque les ardeurs de l'inconsidérée jeunesse bouillonnaient en mon corps" (68v, "from now on I must be more fearful of God's judgements than I was when the passions of reckless youth surged within my body"), he confesses right before providing Juliet with the sleeping potion, offering a glimpse of his youthful passions while simultaneously removing them from his present. It is therefore unsurprising that, upon her awakening in the tomb, Juliette simply asks her "beau père" (67v, "good father") for reassurance: her trust in him is unflinching, so she never questions his presence in the crypt, nor does she think of a potential misbehaviour on his part.

One last diversion from Bandello – and a decisive one for the Elizabethan line – is Boaistuau's references to Lorenzo's despair, especially with regard to the death of his *protégés*, reminding the reader of Da Porto's presentation of the friar here. Pierre and the friar "menèrent un deuil" ("grieved") at the sight of Rhoméo's corpse and mourned him like "ceux qui ont aimé quelqu'on de parfait amitié" (78v, "those who have truly loved a friend") would. The same grief is foregrounded in Laurent's last confession, a sequence again similar to Da Porto's narrative. Bandello had actually cut the friar out of the picture, leaving the disclosure of the affair to the servant Pietro and condensing his confession in just a few lines.¹⁴ Boaistuau, instead,

14 "Quivi giunti presero i frati e Pietro e, inteso il pietoso caso degli sfortunati amanti, lasciati i frati con buona guardia, condussero Pietro al signor Bartolomeo e gli fecero intendere del modo che trovato l'avevano" (63v, "having arrived there, they took the friars and Pietro and, having heard the pitiful case of the unfortunate lovers, they left the friars in good custody and took Pietro before lord Bartolomeo and told him of how they had found him").

gives the floor back to Laurent, letting him go over the events to clear his name and assuage the Montague-Capulet feud. However, the attitude of the ‘Frenched’ Franciscan differs starkly from his Italian antecedent. If Lorenzo proves reluctant to speak, and only resolves to do so when cornered by his confreres, Laurent shows up to the trial with “sa barbe blanche toute baignée de grosses larmes” (“his white beard all wet with tears”) and, “sans s’émouvoir aucunement pour l’accusation proposée” (81r, “unperturbed by the accusation put forward”), he recapitulates the unhappy circumstances to prove his *bona fides*.¹⁵ His testimony occupies “several pages in the story of the French storyteller” (Boudou 2021, 153), who expatiates upon the friar’s feelings and motives with the effect of foregrounding his inner struggles and strong moral fibre. Da Porto, on his part, laconically encapsulates the passage in but one short sentence (“et così tutta la passata istoria fu astretto, presenti molti, raccontargli”, D7r; “thus he was compelled to tell him the whole story before a large gathering”), while Bandello excludes Lorenzo from the sequence all together.

Expansions and variations of this length are hardly surprising, given “the very loose conception of translation” (Arnould 2021, 121) that orients the *Histoires Tragiques*. “Boaistuau is a translator of Bandello, but his translation entertains an ambiguous relationship

¹⁵ It is worth noting that the *Histoires Tragiques* are conceived at a crucial moment of judicial transition in France, when private written audits were gradually being substituted by orally performed public trials. Anxieties and insecurities related to this change percolated through the time’s tragic short stories (Langer 1999) which often incorporate sections of *factio legis* meant to “unveil all that relates to the ‘inner forum’ (psychology, motives, passions of the characters) better than secular jurisdictions” (Campagne 2010, 333; see also Pech 2000). This narrative and rhetorical feature can be found in Boaistuau’s *Histoire Troisième*, marked by the expansion and spectacularisation of Laurent’s trial: after their tragic death, the lovers’ corpses are laid down “sur un théâtre à la veue de tout le monde” (81r, “on a stage for the whole world to see”) and it is on that same “théâtre” (“stage”) that, in the immediate follow up, the friar mounts to be “publiquement interrog[é]” (“publicly questioned”) and thus offer a “piteux spectacle” (“sorry spectacle”) to the Veronese citizens. This ‘staged’ confession relies heavily on pathetic tones to serve the moralisation of the character, while also thematising the newly introduced public procedures of French justice systems.

with the *Novelle*” (Grande 2021, 16), so much so that it qualifies as “a fully independent work in which the Italian text serves as nothing but a starting point” (Cavallini 2021, 396), extensively manipulated to fit new narrative and didactic purposes. This adaptive freedom proves crucial in distancing Laurent from the self-centred, scheming religious outlined in the Italian novellas, allowing Boaiustuau to turn him into the moral beacon of the story.

In view of his relation with both Bandello and Boaiustuau,¹⁶ it is now interesting to ask how Brooke related to such contradictory religious portrayals. For his part, Painter kept very close to Boaiustuau, presenting his readers with a sympathetic and virtuous friar¹⁷ who participates in the lovers’ torment and helps them out of paternal love and pity.¹⁸ But what about the first English adaptor, and nearest source to Shakespeare? Did he revive the calculating go-between featured in Da Porto and Bandello or follow the more positive line initiated by Boaiustuau? In the light of the unmerciful depiction of friars it encapsulates, the prefatory address of his *Tragical History* would lead us to credit the former option:

16 In the frontispiece of his *Tragical History*, Brooke credits Bandello as his source, but textual comparisons reveal that the Italian text was actually read through the lens of Boaiustuau’s version. The reasons for this misdirection are hard to explain. According to Paul Frazer, the inclusion of Bandello in the frontispiece might bespeak Brooke’s will to distance his work from the anti-Catholic reputation earned by Boaiustuau in England (see Frazer 2020, 13): a possibility that, as we shall see, chimes in well with Arthur’s puzzling handling of the character of Friar Laurence.

17 “This Friar Laurence . . . was an ancient Doctor of Divinity, of the order of the Friars Minors, who besides the happy profession which he had made in study of holy writ, was very skilful in Philosophy, and a great searcher of/nature secrets, and exceeding famous in Magic knowledge, and other hidden and secret sciences, which nothing diminished his reputation, because he did not abuse the same” (Painter 2022, Z7r).

18 “I have known your husband from his cradle, and he hath daily committed unto me the greatest secrets of his conscience, and I have so dearly loved him again, as if he had been mine own son. Wherefore my heart can not abide that any man should do him wrong in that specially wherein my counsel may stand him instead. And for so much as you are his wife, I ought likewise to love you, and seek means to deliver you from the martyrdom and anguish” (Painter 2022, Aa8r).

To this end, good Reader, is this tragical matter written, to describe unto thee a couple of unfortunate lovers, thralling themselves to dishonest desire, neglecting the authority and advice of parents and friends, conferring their principal counsels with drunken gossips, and superstitious friars (the naturally fit instruments of unchastity) attempting all adventures of peril, for the attaining of their wished lust using auricular confession (the key to whoredom, and treason) for furtherance of their purpose . . .¹⁹

Recovering Bandello's didactic aim and giving it a more heavily moralising spin, Brooke chastises the couple's "dishonest desire" and defiance to parental authority, emphasising the connivance of "superstitious friars" who use confession as a "key to whoredom and treason". Under these premises, the 'Englished' friar seems then to have retained none of the good qualities Boastuaud had attached to him, coming closer to the manipulative and unreliable religious found in the Italian line. Brooke's verses, however, belie such conclusions.

"What we actually find in the poem is a range of complex, sympathetically depicted Catholic characters" (Frazer 2020, 11) whose actions are romanticised and pitied rather than scolded. Friar Laurence is no exception. Far from the corruptor foreshadowed in the pre-text, the "ancient", "barefoot friar" is cast as a wise, compassionate, and authoritative citizen in Verona who sides with the lovers because he truly cares for them. While introducing him to the reader, the narrator labels the Franciscans as "gross unlearned" fools but then goes on to specify that Laurence is not "as the most" (567): he is "doctor of divinity" (568) and practices natural science and magic without making "lewd abuse" (574) of them; he is therefore held in high esteem by his fellow-citizens, who "run" to him to "shrive themselves" (577). As the story unfolds, he guides Romeo and Juliet to the best of his abilities and, after witnessing their tragic death, he mourns them "with piteous plaint". Damping his white beard with "great fast-falling tears" (2828), he recounts their vicissitudes to the Prince of Verona, clearing their name and his own reputation. In short, he seems to display all of Laurence's virtues and none of Lorenzo's vices. Yet it would be

19 All quotations are from Brooke 2022.

hasty to catalogue him as a specular reflection of Boaistuau's friar.

I agree with Paul Frazer that Brooke gives "more complexity" (2020, 16) to his Franciscan, a many-sidedness that stems from the partial restoration of the ambiguity erased by his French counterpart. Let us consider Laurence's hesitations in marrying Romeus and Juliet. Brooke follows Boaistuau in having Laurence bless their union "[p]art won by earnest suit" (607; my emphasis) and part encouraged by the hope that "Of both households' wrath this marriage might appease" (609). But when their circumstances start changing for the worse, he is tossed between desire to help and fear of retribution. In putting such preoccupations in verse, the Elizabethan adaptor swerves from his source, inverting the order of Laurence's worries: "For if she fail in aught, the matter published, / Both she and Romeus were undone, himself eke punished" (2059-60). In the following lines Laurence declares that "... he rather would in hazard set his fame" (2063) than risk Juliet's virtue – so Brooke reconnects with Boaistuau here – but the previous reshuffling refocuses the attention on his fears for himself, overshadowing his concern for the lovers.

Another slight but significant discontinuity of this kind occurs a few lines later, when Juliet recovers from the effects of the sleeping potion and, setting eyes on Laurence, asks: "What, friar Laurence, is it you? Where is my Romeus?" (2710). In having her marvel at the sight of the religious, Brooke adds questions that are remindful of the ones Bandello's Juliet addresses to her dying Romeo,²⁰ but he redirects them towards Laurence. He thus finds some sort of middle ground between the girl's disconcerting awakening as described in the Italian novella and the new circumstances presented in the French narrative, namely the elimination of the lovers' last exchange and the anteposition of the friar's entrance in the crypt. As a result, Juliet's reaction comes across as more ambiguous than in Boaistuau, although no reference to Laurence's abuses is reintegrated at this point in the poem. We have to go back a few lines to find an allusion of this sort: possibly elaborating on Boaistuau's hint at Laurent's "ardeurs", Brooke lingers on

20 "Oimè, voi siete qui vita mia? Ov'è frate Lorenzo?" ("Alas, are you there my life? Where's friar Laurence?").

A secret place . . . well sealed round about,
 The mouth of which so close is shut, that none may find it out;
 But room there is to walk, and place to sit and rest,
 Beside a bed to sleep upon, full of soft and trimly drest,

...

Where he was wont in youth his fair friends to bestow. (1267-70; 1273)

Much like Laurent, the seventy-year-old Laurence has long renounced to such “fair friends”, so much so that he uses this room to hide Romeus after Tybalt’s killing. Brooke, however, takes evident heed in suggesting that the virtuous friar has not always been deaf to the callings of the flesh – an element barely mentioned in Boaiſtuau but repeatedly underlined in *Bandello*.

What do these narrative twists and turns reveal about the circum-Mediterranean evolution of Friar Laurence? For one, that ambivalence became a linchpin of his characterisation well before Shakespeare. As our brief exercise in intertextual reading suggests, the friar is set up as a self-absorbed and duplicitous go-between in *Da Porto*, and it is in this same guise that he resurfaces in *Bandello*. The latter’s reception in mid-sixteenth-century France marks an interruption in the linear transmission of such characteristics: steering away from his Italian sources, Boaiſtuau casts his Laurent into the mould of a caring, compassionate, and pious advisor who is only interested in the lovers’ happiness and the wider civic reconciliation their union could favour. These traits are then passed down to Painter, while Brooke takes a slightly different route in his earlier adaptation: contradicting what had been implied in his prefatory address, the first English translator (and closest author to Shakespeare) problematises the positive portrayal inherited from Boaiſtuau by recuperating some of *Bandello*’s remarks and adding new insights into Laurence’s youthful indiscretions. The effect is that of darkening the friar’s depiction, making him relapse into the ambiguity originally introduced by *Da Porto* and *Bandello*.

The possible inputs behind such alterations are manifold and difficult to pin down. “Performed and retold for different audiences, narratives shifted in significance” (Walter 2019, 288), adapting not only to the authors’ different ideological programmes but also to the interdiscursive, cultural, and historic material that compounded

the story in its transnational migration. As for the earliest Italian depictions of our friar, it is for instance relevant to point out that duplicity and moral abjection are anything but uncommon in the novelistic treatment of this religious man. Scholars have long examined the anticlerical sentiment that informs Medieval and early modern short narratives – a vein of vitriolic criticism that sprang from real-life experiences as much as literary conventions and targeted the very foundations of ordered life: poverty, chastity, and obedience. Capitalising upon the heritage of Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Medieval *facetiae*,²¹ European novelists produced “an infinity of texts” hinged on the derision of “‘the idleness, lust, gluttony, feathers, slumber, lazy inactivity’ and the countless other vices of the clergy” (Niccoli 2005, 19), compiling a rich catalogue of anticlerical invectives that proved especially vicious when aimed at low-ranking churchmen such as priests, monks, and friars. The latter in particular served as the butt of innumerable jokes about avarice, gluttony and lust²² to which they were believed to be exposed due to their “distinctive socio-professional identity” (Campbell, Gianfrancesco and Tarrant 2018, 205). During the Renaissance, mendicant orders were indeed widely spread and influential, so much so that their support could prove determining for the stability of the local governments. Their members were frequently appointed as confessors of noblemen and thus benefitted from unusual material privileges and political preferment. What is more, friars were not expected to live in the seclusion of their friary. On the contrary, they were encouraged to travel and mingle with the wider Catholic society, preaching and spreading knowledge among their confreres and brethren. These prerogatives allowed them to “inhabit multiple social worlds, moving through them with relative ease” (Campbell, Gianfrancesco and Tarrant 2018, 205) – a form of freedom that, on the other hand, made mendicants an easy prey to wordily corruptions.

21 The main reference is of course Poggio Bracciolini's *Liber facetiarum*, a collection of bawdy jokes and anecdotes published around 1476 and subsequently translated into several European languages, French and English included. For more on this, see Hellinga 2014.

22 For a pan-European survey of such novelistic portrayal see Clements and Gibaldi 1977. On the dissemination of anticlerical *topoi* in the Italian novelistic tradition prior to the Renaissance see Pasquini 2012, 209-27.

With this in mind, we can begin to understand the reasons for the friars' popularity as anticlerical narrative targets. But if during the Middle Ages such attacks remained mostly "a literary device for 'pleasant' and lively representation" (Tateo 1998, 45), a *topos* ingrained in the novelistic genre itself and often devoid of properly polemical subtexts, between the late fifteenth century and the end of the Tridentine Council the anticlerical tradition modified progressively "its specificity and came to be defined in a different way, not only under the pressure of the literary sedimentation of a commonplace but also of a series of concomitant historical events" (Niccoli 2005, 28), first and foremost the spread of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformist reaction to it. The shock waves produced by such pivotal transformations radiated differently through *Romeo and Juliet's* source chain, varying in intensity according to the timeframe of composition, the wider sociocultural context of the novellas, as well as the authors' individual responses to the turmoil of the age.

Starting from the Italian line of transmission, it is known that Da Porto and Bandello tried their hand at the story in a solidly Catholic society "en route to the restrictions demanded by the Counter-Reformation" (Perocco 2018, 54). Despite a generalised discontent with the Papacy and the ways of the clergy, the Reformation failed to take root on the Peninsula due to the unfavourable conditions determined, *inter alia*, by the influence of the State of the Church and the lack of support of the local *élites*. However, if it is true that most rulers decided to side with the Pope and back up the initiatives of the Tridentine Council and the Inquisition,²³ the fragmented sociopolitical and cultural texture of the early-sixteenth-century Italian states calls for some nuancing. It is for instance interesting to point out that, while generally marginalised and persecuted, Reformist ideas did proliferate among the few philo-Protestant *conventicole*²⁴ concentrated in Northern commercial cities such

23 The matter is of course complex. For a general overview of its historical and cultural implications see for instance Firpo 1993; Benedict, Seidel and Tallon 2013; Firpo 2016.

24 The term designates small groups of religious dissidents usually gathered around influential courtly personalities – for example, Renate of France in Ferrara or the Gonzagas and the Colonnas in Milan, as well as more selec-

as Milan, Venice, Bologna, Lucca, or Vicenza.²⁵ A province of the Venetian Republic involved in Mediterranean textile trade and therefore open to material and immaterial international exchanges (see Braudel 1953, 392), between the fifteenth and the sixteenth century Vicenza harboured several heterodox circles gathered around noble local families, including the Da Portos. Under the influence of classical readings ranging from Aristotle and Plato to Cicero's *De Officiis* and inspired by Lorenzo Valla's philological enterprise, in the years preceding the Reformation "the Da Porto's 'circle' lays more and more often the emphasis on the inner reformation of the faithful, accompanied by the liberty to criticize the corruption of the clergy and the Church, incapable of electing an angelic Pope" (Olivieri 1992, 41). This 'liberty' – understood as the right to intellectual, political, and confessional self-determination – finds expression in original *carmina* centred on Christian virtues and vices and, later on, in prose studies concerned with the individual interpretation of the Bible, the safeguarding of the soul, and the necessity for a wide-ranging spiritual reformation (see Salmistrato 1981-1982). It is in this effervescent milieu – also enriched by the intellectual contribution of the Trissinos – that Luigi Da Porto was born. Little is known about his youth, apart from the fact that, after his parents' untimely death, he was entrusted to the care of his uncle Francesco and grandfather Gabriele, one of the leaders of the family's 'heretic' circle (Olivieri 1992, 42). It does not seem farfetched to assume, then, that the ideas that circulated in this ambience played a role in his intellectual upbringing, possibly motivating the retaliatory (and largely stereotypical) tones that would later inform his portrayal of Lorenzo.

Despite adopting similar strategies in his rewriting of the story,²⁶ Bandello comes from a very different background. A mendicant friar

tive intellectual circles born in academic environments. On the subject see Ambrosini 2013.

²⁵ Olivieri 1992 still represents a point of reference on the Reformist currents in Vicenza. See also the more recent Dalla Pozza 2017.

²⁶ In this respect, Rozzo (2005), despite acknowledging Bandello's formal rejection of Luther's theses, identifies some thought-provoking points of convergence between Reformist ideals and Bandello's own appraisal of corrupted clergy members.

himself and prospective Bishop of Agen, in the *Novelle* the author navigates “the amphibious dimension of his writing and position” (Menetti 2005, 59), which he achieved thanks to the intercession of his uncle Vincenzo, General Master of the Dominican Order from 1501 to 1506. Over those years, Bandello joined him in a reconnaissance mission among several European friaries with a view to bringing “his unreformed confreres” (Fiorato 1979, 110) under control and restoring a strict observance of the Rule.²⁷ To call to order the members of St Eustorge, the most ancient Dominican convent in Milan, in 1510 Bandello was even involved in an expedition to the French court of Blois, in which he participated by virtue of his family’s reputation as well as his own moral and diplomatic qualities. This longstanding commitment to the Observant cause bespeaks, in Elisabetta Menetti’s words, a “spiritual agreement with his stern uncle Vincenzo” (2005, 60), a reformist rigour that resonates with his (failed) attempt to renounce the habit in 1526²⁸ and the moral decadence of the clergy insistently addressed in the *Novelle*. In many of his stories Bandello adopts indeed emphatically polemical tones to expose the corruption of priests and friars who do not live by the Rule, be they Dominicans or, more often, Franciscans. Several examples of such attacks could be cited,²⁹ but suffice it here to mention the deceiving preacher don Faustino (2.2), the lecherous friar Filippo (3.6), the ridiculed Franciscans of 4.2, or the dishonest Dominicans in 2.48. Lorenzo’s derogatory portrayal is therefore not isolated in the corpus the *Novelle*, where it actually seems to contribute to the thematisation of the broader religious and ethical concerns of a rigorous Observant caught in the midst of the sixteenth-century confessional crisis.

Boaistuau, for his part, engaged with such materials at “a pivotal date in French political and cultural history” (Fiorato 2003, 135). The year 1559 in France marks the end of the Italian Wars, but also the eve of the First French War of Religion (1560). The tensions that

27 On the issue of Observance see for example Lodone 2018. On the specific case of Dominicans, see Zarri 2016; on Franciscans, Eibel 2010.

28 More detailed information about Bandello’s biography can be gathered in Fiorato 1979.

29 Cf. Rozzo 2005 for a more comprehensive survey of Bandello’s anti-clerical novellas.

fed the conflict, heightened by the spread of the Reformation in the southwest of the kingdom and the related drafting of the French Confession of Faith (1559), advanced in parallel with the work of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), whose direct outcome was the issuing, that same year, of the first Roman Index of Forbidden Books. The loss of all “social, moral, religious beliefs” (Fiorato 2003, 137) implicated in such transformations filtered into the literary and cultural discourse of the time, and Boaistuau’s production makes no exception. “It is hard to pin down the religious engagement of this writer” (Grande 2021, 165), for very little remains concerning his life and personal beliefs. His works, on the other hand, are of little help in the task, since they show a tendency to mixing “strict Christian, if not Catholic, orthodoxy with profane-like sensibilities” (Grande 2021, 12). The same indeterminacy reflects into the dedicatory notes that accompany such writings, addressed to prominent Protestant and Catholic figures alike. The case of the *Histoires Tragiques* is rather telling: the first Parisian editions are offered to Matthieu de Mauny, Benedictine Abbot of Noyers, in exchange for an unspecified “courtoisie” (“courtesy”); just a few months later, a second edition of the same work is issued in honour of Elizabeth I, head of the Protestant Church of England.³⁰ What is more, this ambiguous political and theological standing is not confined to the collection’s paratexts. Out of the six tales adapted from Bandello, “the story of Rhoméo and Julliette” is “the most marked by ambiguity”: its *sommaire* frames it as an orthodox example of “the greatness of God’s works”, while the actual narrative pivots on a much more heterodox “relentness of Fortune against the youth’s happiness” (Boudou 2021, 150). The coexistence, on a structural level, of such opposing principles translates into an ethical complexity that “justifies an ambivalence of characters [and] explains the attenuation, in Boaistuau, of some of the traits that characterized certain novellas of Bandello” (Arnould 2003, 99). The friar’s portrayal seems to fall into this latter category: the unsympathetic, stock character type sketched in the Italian line “becomes here the irreproachable figure of a venerable religious” (Fiorato 2003, 139), extensively rewritten

30 On the characteristics of this edition, which features only minor changes in respect to the Parisian *princeps*, see Bamforth 2018.

to fit into the ethical reorientation of the collection and give voice to the moralising intent of the novella (Arnould 2003). As argued by Nancy Virtue, “one of the most obvious changes Boaistuau makes in Bandello’s text” is indeed the removal of the strong narratorial presence charged with the didactic commentary on the stories (1998, 42), a variation achieved through the omission of all explicit traces of Bandello’s narrator. Far from completely gone, “this voice” still makes itself heard “through the numerous editorial changes Boaistuau made” to the original text (43), among which we may count even the friar’s moralising reshaping. In one of Boaistuau’s most extensive interpolations – the final trial sequence – the friar is in fact turned into a sort of virtuous, pitiful hero who re-establishes moral and social order by atoning for his sins and bringing all ethical and legal transgressors to justice. Thanks to this alteration, Boaistuau manages then to turn “a tragedy of contrasted and perturbing love” into “a lesson that comforts society and power” (Fiorato 2005, 140) given by a newly moralised *frère* Laurent.

As for Brooke, his version comes to light in an equally problematic sociocultural texture. Around 1562, the English state was caught in “political anxieties, primarily concerning its new religion and political regime, and the prospect of returning (once again) to Roman Catholicism” (Frazer 2020, 5). With the 1559 Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity Elizabeth had formally restored England to Protestantism. However, the actual implementation of the new Protestant legislation was hindered by the obstruction of the Catholic bishops in Parliament who, after having gained considerable wealth and power under the Marian rule, refused to acknowledge the supremacy of a Protestant monarch. Between 1559 and 1562 such opponents were gradually substituted with formerly exiled or moderate Protestant bishops (Loades 1992, 159), with a view to providing the English State with a more cooperative episcopate. It is worth noting, nevertheless, that five out of the twenty-five religious included in the 1563 Convocation had actually “continued to serve as priests during the Catholic regime” (Williams 1995, 237), a hint at the “remarkably elastic” (Poole 2019, 89) approach of the Crown to issues of religious (and political) conformity. A much stronger action was taken against the other non-compliant Catholic bodies in the Kingdom, including the Grey

Observant Friars at Greenwich. Dissolved in 1538 under Henry VIII and reinstated seventeen years later by the will of Mary I, the flourishing Franciscan friary in London was again suppressed with the Elizabethan settlement.³¹ Several of its members were forced to flee abroad, while others took refuge in Scotland, a neighbouring kingdom that, from 1561, came under the control of Mary Stuart. A Catholic bride of the Dauphin of France, Mary could count on the support of the significant Catholic population concentrated in the Scottish territory, thus posing a threat to the stability of the English Crown that, throughout the 1560s, was further aggravated by the prospect of an imminent match between Elizabeth and the Catholic Archduke of Austria Charles II.³²

This is the climate in which Brooke worked on his version of the Romeo and Juliet narrative and, consequently, on the characterisation of Friar Laurence. Little evidence remains about Arthur's life up to this point, but the commemorative verses of Thomas Brooke and George Turberville reveal that he died in 1563 – just one year after the publication of the poem – on a mission meant to bring martial aid to the French Huguenots. This information has encouraged generations of critics to engage in a militantly Protestant reading of the *Tragical History*,³³ a practice seemingly validated by the anti-Catholic sentiment discernible in the poem's preface. More recent scholarship has leveraged upon the inconsistency between the disparaging images amassed in the pre-text and the commendable Catholic figures portrayed in the narrative to support a more "theologically nuanced" (Frazer 2020, 20) interpretation of the work, arguing for Brooke's confessional ambivalence rather than downright intolerance. His handling of the main representative of Roman Catholic ethos in the story offers an interesting example of such an attitude: a figure of high moral standing, Friar Laurence sits awkwardly against the superstitious corruptor pre-empted in the preface and the crowd of bawdy mendicants that, at that

31 These events are further analysed in Erlar 2013.

32 For more on these crucial events and transformations see Loades 1992; Williams 1995; Carleton 2001; Chavura 2011.

33 Examples of this critical stance are offered in Shaheen 1987; Bryant 1993; Pearce 2013; Dahlquist 2016.

time, saturated English Protestant discourse. Picking abundantly from the catalogue of friars' failures compiled along the lines of Medieval "academic treatises, literary satires, jestbook fabliaux, and theatrical interludes" (Matusiak 2014, 211), Elizabethan Pro-Reform writers resorted frequently to the conventional image of the lustful, opportunistic mendicant to give voice and body to the corruption of the Church of Rome and bolster the Protestant cause.³⁴ The literary dissemination of such blameworthy religious characters rested upon the wider opinion English society had of monks and friars, formed during the years that preceded the Henrician dissolution (1540) and still widespread throughout the Elizabethan age. Isolated behind cloistered walls, ordered religious were largely perceived as idle hypocrites who had betrayed their vow to poverty to live off of the benevolence of their patrons and enjoy a wide range of wordily pleasures.

Interestingly enough, Brooke would have found a fitting reflection of such a stereotype in *Bandello*, the only source acknowledged in the *Tragical History's* frontispiece. Yet, in line with his actual French source, Brooke's Laurence is envisaged as a virtuous and well-intentioned advisor who has fully distanced himself from his dubious past.³⁵ How to explain this atypical characterisation,

34 Let us mention, by way of example, the famous case of John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563), a work of Protestant history and martyrology that features numerous mendicants envisaged as hypocritical corruptors: see Fernandes 2020.

35 Interestingly, the same positive portrayal of the friar resurfaces in a later dramatic rendition of the story, the anonymous Jacobean tragedy *Romeus et Julietta*, composed around 1615 in Latin and modelled upon Brooke. "If he gains his dear bride, pious Juliet, happy in her marriage, that priest will grant them surcease", we read in the chorus. "He is not unschooled (like the common run of priests), but rather a grave and learned minister, a member of the holy Franciscan Order, who knows how to disclose the secrets of abstruse nature. He penetrates the hidden mysteries of the mages, being mighty in that most abstruse art, often revealing amazing things. For there's no disgrace in understanding the profound secrets of the art of magic, if no scurvy swindles are involved. Every kind of learning is lawful and claims its own fine kind of glory. It is lawless abuse that spoils the art, firm ground is put beneath your feet by lawful practise. Romeo is seeking his cell, to him Romeo will expose his wound, revealing the se-

especially in the light of the anti-Catholic imagery evoked in the poem's preface? Paul Frazer has recently put forward an interesting proposal: writing at a time of political uncertainty and theological inconsistency, Brooke might have deemed it wise to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, so to say. Playing up the ambiguity of his text and characters, he incorporated Protestant-friendly anticlerical rhetoric in his *Address* as a sort of red herring, aiming at distracting more fiery Puritan readers from the conciliatory, even pro-Catholic tones adopted in the poem. The choice to follow Boaiustau's more positive depiction of the friar, introducing only minor hiccups in his otherwise virtuous lifepath, might have served this 'deceptive' purpose, allowing Brooke to re-establish ideological neutrality by counterbalancing the anti-Catholic rhetoric exploited in the preface.

This interpretative knot remains difficult to untie, but the alternative scenario it evokes brings another thought-provoking question to the table: what did Brooke actually mean when, in the closing remarks of that preface, he referred to "the same argument lately set forth on stage *with more commendation* than I can look for (being there much better set for than I have or can do)" (my emphasis)? This play is now lost and no information on its dating, sources, or general development has been found to date. It can only be presumed that it was staged sometime before 1562 (perhaps in 1561, as the LPD³⁶ proposes) and that it was among the first dramatic variations of the Romeo and Juliet story in England. Hence, an antecedent to Shakespeare's. We have no idea whether it featured a Friar Laurence or, if so, in what fashion it portrayed him. Brooke is the only one who mentions its existence and the confessional and ideological ambiguity displayed in his narrative casts a doubt over his judgement, making any speculation pointless.

cret to his friend, and store up his advice deep within his mind. Being a man who preens himself in that science, he will devise a means of lightening your burden and bring the business to a happy end. Would that the gods would favor this marriage, granting this noble youth his wish, granting this chaste girl her desire! Let the pious priest accomplish chaste things, and may happy fortune return home, let their good faces return to happiness, so that they can celebrate a festive day" (An. 1615).

³⁶ *Lost Plays Database*.

What can be remarked, however, is that, by the time Shakespeare laid hands on Brooke and Painter, friars had become a popular asset of Elizabethan productions:

Henslowe's accounts, for instance, show that friars were a regular part of the spectacle at the Rose and Fortune playhouses in the 1590s and early 1600s. In 1598, the Rose's tiring house had in store "iiij freyers gownes and iiij hoodes to them," as well as another "freyers gowne of grey." Strange's Men and later the Admiral's Men wore these costumes in a handful of surviving plays between 1592 and 1602, including "fryer bacon" (possibly Greene's play, but more likely *John of Bordeaux*), three offerings by Marlowe (*The Jew of Malta*, *Doctor Faustus*, *The Massacre at Paris*), the anonymously authored *A Knack to Know a Knave* and *Look About You*, and Munday and Chettle's *The Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntington*. But there were others, as Henslowe's notations make clear, possibly even a minor genre now faded from view. (Matusiak 2014, 209)

We are in the dark as to the contents of lost plays, including the one mentioned by Brooke, but most surviving scripts frame friars as agents of all sorts of sins, ranging from greed and hypocrisy (Thomas Heywood's *The Pardoner and the Friar*, John Bale's *Three Laws*) to promiscuity, political intermission (George Peele's *The Troublesome Reign of King John* and *Edward I*, Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* and *The Massacre at Paris*, John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*), and dark magic (Christopher Marlowe's *Faustus*, Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*).³⁷ It does not seem inappropriate to conclude, then, that the Tudor stage was as unwelcoming a place for Catholic religious as the pages of coeval Puritan writings and European novellas.

It is onto this inhospitable milieu that Shakespeare's Laurence was grafted. Given the popularity of bawdy stage friars in the 1590s, the playwright could well have taken up the stock character outlined in Brooke's preface, a negative avatar his audience was clearly familiar with. "Shakespeare wrote for a commercial theatre that profited from appealing to audience's expectations and desires" (Britton and Walters 2018, 126), so it would have made perfect sense for him to bring another immoral friar on stage. But Shakespeare

37 For a detailed survey of printed plays, see Berger *et al.* 1998.

was not just a follower of trends, of course. He was “a thoughtful and creative actor-playwright” proficient in revising and transforming Elizabethan dramatic models: “Each of Shakespeare’s plays is in fact the product of a complex creative negotiation between the materials for its story and the dramatic paradigms governing its stage adaptation, a negotiation in which Shakespeare bends both sources and theatrical forms to his distinctive purpose” (Kay 2018, 159-60). Friar Laurence provides an illuminating example of such contaminations, since his characterisation invokes the paradigm of the early modern theatrical friars while simultaneously trying to upend it³⁸ – an ambiguity Shakespeare achieved by cleverly reworking on Laurence’s narrative precursors.

Following Brooke (and perhaps also Painter, both based on Boaiustau), Shakespeare portrays the Franciscan as a “reverend holy Friar” (4.2.30)³⁹ – a chaste, well-intentioned advisor who wants to drag the lovers out of their predicament and restore civic harmony. However, even “virtue itself turns to vice, being misapplied” (2.3.21), as his own actions demonstrate. After a short-lived protest against Romeo’s “sudden haste” (2.3.93), Laurence agrees to marry two minors behind their parents’ back, using the sacrament of confession as a cover-up. Then, when a deserted Juliet is betrothed to Paris, he elaborates a subterfuge to deceive the Capulets (again) and save her from bigamy, indirectly causing her and Romeo’s death. Upon the sight of Paris’s and Romeo’s corpses in the tomb, he but briefly begs Juliet to flee with him, eventually leaving her to her destiny to try and save himself. He “trembles, sighs, and weeps” (5.3.184) when the guards apprehend him but, given the circumstances, one cannot help but wonder whether he is crying out of pain for the lovers or fear of punishment. Either way, his fame is enough to protect

38 To add to Shakespeare’s complex engagement with such paradigms, it is interesting to remark that *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* – one of the earliest Shakespearean comedies, set in the same city (and therefore context) as *Romeo and Juliet* and featuring a religious character named Friar Laurence – harbours a neutral representation of mendicants: Silvia meets Eglamour “At Friar Patrick cell, / Where I intend *holy* confession” (Shakespeare 2014: 4.3.44-5, my emphasis); Friar Laurence himself is described by the Duke as a pious man.

39 All quotations are from Shakespeare 2003.

him: despite all his lies and missteps, Prince Escalus pardons him because “we still have known thee for a holy man” (5.3.270).

Interestingly, this is not the only occasion on which doubts about his conduct are dispelled on the strength of his reputation. Right before taking the drug he concocted for her, Juliet’s faith in him wavers and she questions his motives:

What if it be a poison which the Friar
Subtly hath ministered to have me dead,
Lest in this marriage he should be dishonoured,
Because he married me before to Romeo?
I fear it is; and yet me thinks it should not,
For he hath still been tried a holy man. (4.3.24-9)⁴⁰

In Brooke, Painter, and Boaiustauu, Juliet does hesitate before drinking the potion, but she never doubts its maker. In having the girl second-guess Laurence’s design, Shakespeare comes paradoxically closer to Da Porto and Bandello, who had Giulietta question the friar’s integrity upon her awakening in the tomb. The imagined reasons for the friar’s misconduct are of course different – lechery in the Italian line, self-serving cunning in Shakespeare – but the three storylines seem to converge towards the idea that the religious cannot be trusted when his interests are on the line.

Together with the poor choices elicited above, this “lurking weakness” (Blakemore Evans 2003, 23) builds a case around Laurence’s ambivalence. “He can be characterized, as is customary, to be the representative of moderation and wisdom. But his stratagems and their aborted results also make it tempting to characterize him as a bungling priest” (Brenner 1980, 48) akin to the ones that, in the 1590s, crowded the Elizabethan stage. Laurence cannot be cast in the mould of the transgressive stage friar nor in that of virtuous moral guide. He interacts with both models but corresponds to neither.

Such a complex depiction testifies to Shakespeare’s creative

⁴⁰ The accusation is slightly milder in Q1: “What if the Friar should give me this drink / To poison me, for fear I should disclose/Our former marriage? Ah, I wrong him much, / He is a holy and religious man; / I will not entertain so bad a thought” (Shakespeare 2022).

engagement with the dramatic and discursive conventions of his time, while also foregrounding the “semantic potential” (Bigliuzzi 2018, 37) embedded in his sources. The ambiguous characterisation of the friar is a recurrent element in the source chain, taking “different emphasis and connotation depending on the narrative perspective and context” of each retelling (Bigliuzzi 2018, 37). Likely prompted by their own beliefs and life experiences, as well as by the broader literary and cultural context of early-sixteenth-century Italy, Da Porto and Bandello fully exploit the satirical possibilities offered by Lorenzo, drawing heavily on novellesque anticlerical rhetoric to sketch him as a selfish hypocrite who embodies the corruption of the Church of Rome. Boaistuau tempers this template under the cloud of an impending civil war, taking a newly pious Laurent to task for bad judgement rather than immorality and ultimately turning him into the voice of justice and rectitude in the story. Painter translates Boaistuau’s *histoire* almost word for word, while Brooke revives the friar’s equivocal role by introducing derogatory hints at religious misbehaviour in his *Address* and fusing the positive characterisation found in Boaistuau with references to Laurence’s lecherous past and political self-interest.

It is by way of such transformations, inflected by the authors’ diverging personal, cultural, and contextual situation and interests, that Shakespeare came in contact with the Romeo and Juliet story and, namely, the character of Friar Laurence. The dramatist certainly elaborated on the suggestions offered by his sources, further problematising the friar’s personality and function, but the model for Laurence’s ambiguous treatment was already there, shaped along the lines of the story’s Mediterranean transmission. The acknowledgment of such shared nuclei of significance in the narrative source chain (Bigliuzzi 2018) does not belittle Shakespeare’s achievements, of course. It rather suggests that his “originality lies in the weave, not in the yarn” (Clare 2014, 265), inviting further reflection on the dynamic processes of cross-cultural, cross-linguistic, and cross-generic transformation that impinged on his source material and, therefore, on the conception of his plays. Far from being “static building blocks” (Lynch 1998, 1), narrative sources are complex, multilayered texts that exist “on a similar plane and in dialogue with other historical and cultural

materials” (Loomba 2016, 131) that concur to (re)defining their shape. Their stories were circulated and retold in different forms, languages, and contexts, their characters replicated and remodelled to serve different purposes. Still, they “provide only part of the material with which the playwright works” (Kay 2018, 161). When dramatised and performed before the live audience of a profit-driven Elizabethan playhouse, these narratives came in contact with established patterns of stagecraft and popular dramatic paradigms, to which they responded in terms of both compliance and resistance. The continuous reshaping of the character of Friar Lawrence is a telling example of the possible outcomes of such interrelated processes.

As the ongoing rethinking of source study expands our conceptual and analytical toolbox, it appears all the more interesting to pursue this line of inquiry, with a view to better tracing Shakespeare’s indebtedness “to texts and cultural processes” (Britton, Walter 2018, 10) and allowing a new approach to the kaleidoscopic source materials interfused in the crucible of his imagination.

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