

# Semiotics of the Garden Space in Shakespeare's Tragedy *Romeo and Juliette*

Oksana Razumovskaya

*Philological Faculty*

*Department of Russian Literature and Foreign*

*Peoples' Friendship University of Russia*

Moscow, Russia

ORCID: 0000-0002-5587-0316

**Abstract**—The article aims to analyze the image of the garden in Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliette* from cultural, philological and semiotic points of view. The garden is interpreted here as the most significant part of the stage setting and the key symbol of the imagery of the play. Symbolic meaning of the garden image in *Romeo and Juliette* emerges at the point of convergence of several semiotic traditions and discourses—poetic, biblical, theatrical, theological and etc. The purpose of the article is to reconstruct the scope of contexts enabling the modern readers to perceive the implicit or unobvious levels of meaning of the garden image in the play with its reference to the semiotics of space and the main idea of Shakespeare's tragedy. A special accent is made on the stage conventions of Elizabethan drama (as reflected in *Romeo and Juliette*). The methodology of the research follows the principles of semiotic and cultural analysis of the space and of the garden imagery developed by Dmitri Likhachev and Yuri Lotman.

**Keywords**—*theatre, drama, space, garden, scenery, orchard, tragedy, cultural semiotics, stage conventions*

## I. INTRODUCTION

It is hardly possible to imagine a period in European cultural history which was more enchanted by the image of the garden than the Renaissance. The concept of the garden was symbolic for this epoch as it embodied one of the key principles of the Renaissance philosophy – that of cultivation, both in agricultural and educational sense; the garden was viewed as a visual, literal representation of triumph of human reason and sophistication over nature, including human essence – its mean, primitive and beastly, “natural” part. The garden constituted one of the most important and richly represented elements of the Renaissance imagery in painting, though literature could easily compete with visual arts in this aspect. This fact couldn't have failed to attract the attention of the scholars and researchers, especially in England – Francis Bacon's essay “On the Gardens” in *New Atlantis* (1627) was, probably, one of the earliest examples of this interest. By the middle of the XVIII century, meditations on the garden as an artistic form, on its varieties, structure and aesthetic qualities had become quite a custom among the writers and philosophers in England. At the same time, the art of gardening had turned into a traditional subject of academic research and cultural analysis (which can be illustrated by a

bounty of books like Sir William Temple's *Upon the Gardens of Epicurus*, 1685, or Horatio Walpole's *On Modern Gardening*, 1780) [1]. Such editions had rather practical than theoretical orientation, but they collected a lot of material that would be later conceptualized by the modern scholars like Dmitry Likhachov whose concept of the gardens as texts has served as a basis for the methodology for the present article.

England, apart from a developed tradition of gardening theory, was a birthplace of a unique branch of “garden studies” – connected with investigation of Shakespeare's writing on the subject of horticulture. William Shakespeare who was born in the rural area, rich in lavish and picturesque orchards, seemed to have relished even the verbal reproduction of the garden scenes, making them essential part of his dramatic rhetoric and scenery. The image of the garden itself appears to be recurring in Shakespeare's writings, getting more powerful and detailed with each mention in both lyrical and dramatic works. In *Richard II* (1595?) the garden is one of the elements of the setting and at the same time a political allegory for England under the rule of a bad “gardener”. In some of the other plays, like *Hamlet* (and *Othello*, the garden isn't introduced as a part of the setting, but occurs as a symbol in characters' speech; all the examples eventually develop into one extended motif, a kind of general locus of Shakespeare's fictional world. Shakespeare consistently returned to the symbol of the garden throughout most of his plays and sonnets, but the importance of this symbol for his art was already obvious at the earliest stages of his writing – in the plays of mid-1590ies.

## II. SHAKESPEARE'S GARDEN AS A LITERARY, THEATRICAL AND HORTICULTURAL PHENOMENON

The garden in Shakespeare's plays – as an image obviously burdened with additional symbolism – has been subjected to detailed scrutiny from different points of view, the most unexpected of which was connected with horticultural studies. Some researchers seem to have difficulties in accepting the virtual character of Shakespeare's garden, seeing it as a reflection of the playwright's horticultural experience and a source of inspiration for gardening experiments. Thus originated the figure of Shakespeare the Gardener, and the books on his

“garden-craft” proceeded, especially welcomed by the English people as a proverbially “gardening” nation.

An early example of this trend can be found in Paul Jerrard’s *Flowers from Stratford-on-Avon* (London, 1852), J. Harvey Bloom’s *Shakespeare’s Garden* (London, 1903) or F.G. Savage’s *The Flora and Folk Lore of Shakespeare* (Cheltenham, 1923). Editions like Henry N. Ellacombe’s *The Plant-Lore and Garden-Craft of Shakespeare*, 1896, illustrate the tradition of counting the flowers and scrutinizing the plants of Shakespeare’s literary gardens so intently that one cannot help wondering who the book is aimed at – scholars of Shakespeare or enthusiasts of gardening. The praise for the books of this subgenre emphasizes the authors’ theoretical and practical knowledge of horticulture while Shakespeare’s works are viewed in them as mere illustrative material. Amazingly this horticultural approach not only took root, but even flourished, literally, on the ground rather distant from Shakespearean England both geographically and culturally – in the United States. In Britain the tradition of reconstructing Shakespeare’s gardens can be traced back to the original garden of the writer’s family in New Place, Stratford, while in the North America its spread can probably be explained by a wish to get access to a different dimension of Shakespearean world, less subtle and more material, than his own works can provide, thus creating their own (American) Shakespeare. Nevertheless, if the image of the garden, made up of the motifs from Shakespeare’s works, could be visualized and materialized, the result would be quite opposite to the one intended by these “writing gardeners”. Shakespeare’s garden is a locus initially ambivalent and elusive, deceptive and even hostile, though seemingly joyful and welcoming. No tree, plant or flower therein is what it appears from the first sight. Every element of this horticultural polyphony is rather an entry of some symbolic dictionary, and invites to be meditated upon and interpreted, rather than cultivated and enjoyed.

Probably the earliest appearance of the garden image in Shakespeare’s writing, according to the commonly accepted chronology of his works, takes place in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1590-91?). One of the initial scenes in this play is set in the garden (Act I, Scene III) [2], where two girls, Lucetta and her mistress, are discussing the merits of Julia’s potential suitors, especially Proteus. The garden here is presented as ostentatiously feminine space, assigned for free expression of girls’ private opinions (sometimes naïve, in other moments rather bold), expectations and dreams concerning the opposite sex and romantic relationships, so men are allowed to be present here only as figures in the girls’ talk, not physically. This is an Eden without Adam, but with the Snake, because Lucetta behaves here as a female trickster, luring her mistress out of her virginal garden shelter into the outer world that is full of dangers and love disappointments. As a result Julia leaves her secure home and follows Proteus, disguised as a young page. In her pursuit of love the girl has to abandon her identity – her name, gender, social position, and the scene in the garden is the pivotal point in making this decision.

The same vision of the situation is relevant for of Julia’s close namesake from another early play by Shakespeare, also a Veronese girl, Juliet (*Romeo and Juliette*, 1595). Her meditations about love and the decision to subject herself to its perilous, but sweet yoke also takes place in the garden. The sly maid-servant is replaced here by a comic Nurse appearing in this scene only occasionally, but expressing a view of love and men close to Lucetta’s – a mischievous and practical one. For both Julia and Juliette the moments of reflection in the garden become the crucial point of their way, for the former – through death (metaphorically, by abandoning her personal identity) to love, for the latter – through love (but also abandoning her identity by rejection of family name and bonds) to death.

The importance of the garden as a setting for Shakespeare is obvious from the very fact of its repeatability in his plays, but today the theatre audience is left to wonder what possible ways (scenic, verbal or visual) to emphasize this degree of importance were applied by Shakespeare as a stage producer (if any at all). What a modern reader can discern in the text of the play through its verbal power and his own imagination, and some knowledge of the symbolic language, would have been completely lost on the viewers of the same play five centuries ago. The opposite is also true – Elizabethan theater-goer could have seen the puns and tricks involved in the performance, which are now lost.

Our knowledge of stage and scenic principles of Elizabethan drama is rather limited, and can be reduced to the belief that the scenery was very simple, not to say primitive, and didn’t imply too much artistic freedom and ingenuity. The decorations and scenic belongings rarely presented any special value as a piece of art, but definitely possessed most useful practical qualities [3]. We can suggest that Elizabethan play depended as much on the aural as on the visual perception. That’s why we can only imagine how Capulet’s garden looked like. The only certain detail definitely connected with the garden imagery, which is explicitly mentioned by Juliet during the garden scene – the rose – can be seen not as an element of the setting, but rather as a predictable image from the ‘dictionary’ of love poetry of the epoch.

The image of the rose in the poetry is universally connected with love theme, and the Elizabethan poets could say a lot upon the subject. Rose was attributed to Venus, and its appearance in Juliet’s speech reveals her desire to renounce virginity for the sake of passionate love. For Shakespeare himself this image was especially suggestive: he uses the rose imagery in his sonnets to persuade his lyrical interlocutor to produce offspring and thus to preserve his beauty for the world: “From fairest creatures we desire increase, That thereby beauty’s rose might never die...” (Sonnet I). The rose in the so called “procreation” sonnets by Shakespeare symbolizes perfect beauty; at the same time it is a part of “carpe diem” poetical imagery, which is involved to remind the young coxcomb, who the sonnets are aimed at, that mutual love is the only way to avoid wasteful self-consumption.

Using this image in her monologue Juliet shows that she accepts the argumentation of the sonnets and “votes” for procreative love, instead of chaste solitude (chosen, obviously, by her predecessor in Romeo’s heart, Rosaline). Allusion to the sonnets unexpectedly reveals bitter irony: choosing mutual and procreative love, Juliet makes her first step to death and thus is doomed to stay eternally barren: no offspring would be produced by this passionate couple, as they both are going to die soon after the consummation of their marriage.

The same tragic irony is emphasized by the naming of the setting in this scene: it’s “an orchard” in the text, and not “a garden”. Though closely interrelated and having mutual “ancestor” in the Latin noun “hortus”, these two words slightly differ in the meaning, for “orchard” renders a more explicit idea of producing fruit, getting harvest, while “garden” implies a wider scope of horticultural activities (even non-practical, aesthetic, like growing flowers). At the same time, Juliet herself in her speech evokes a medieval concept of “hortus conclusus”, enclosed garden (“The orchard walls are high and hard to climb”, II, 2 [4]), which used to symbolize the Virgin Mary herself and her chastity, and eventually chastity in general – the state Juliet is bound to keep, at least temporarily, according to her father’s will and because of the fact that the amount of marriageable and attractive young men is dramatically decreasing due to the feud. Thus the image of the orchard acquires paradoxical features, incorporating both the idea of forced maidenhood of the heroine and the hint of her readiness to break this imposed vow and get involved into the cycle of procreation. The first garden scene clearly demonstrates Juliet’s amazing metamorphosis from an infantile, obedient and teenager girl into a sensual and determined young woman – metaphorically, from a tender and fragile bud into a bright flower blooming under the southern sun.

In terms of spatial semiotics of the play, the orchard was probably the only place where the girl of Juliet’s age and social position could find opportunity for solitude, repose and meditation. The house, packed with guests and servants and dominated by her father’s authoritative figure, could not provide her with required peace; the street was out of question – full of the hostile Montagues and other possible dangers, it could give her freedom only at the expense of safety. Like Julia in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Juliet feels in the garden protected enough to speak aloud and express her feelings, not intended for anyone’s ears.

### III. THE GARDEN AS A KEY ELEMENT OF THE SETTING AND IMAGERY IN *ROMEO AND JULIETTE*

The key role of the garden setting is emphasized here by the repetition of the scenes involving it: there are four of them in the tragedy. The garden plays crucial part in Romeo and Juliet’s story – it witnesses their first date (Act II, 3), then hearkens to Juliet’s anxieties about Nurse’s delay (II, 5) and Romeo’s absence after the wedding (III, 2); and finally, in the gallery above the garden the lovers part after their single night together. The garden is a special territory

governed neither by feudal rules (as opposed to both Capulets’ and Montagues’ houses), nor by Christian teaching and wisdom, as friar Lorenzo’s cell. The young couple appeals to the garden as the only place in their life ruled by the laws of nature – which justify their love. Romeo and Juliet are urban lovers; their life is difficult to imagine outside the city walls, so the garden functions as a substitute for the freedom and indulgence of wild nature.

When Juliet pronounces her famous monologue about a name, she “appears above at a window”, which means that she is still symbolically chained to her father’s house and the patriarchal order it represents, but her soul seeks freedom, at least in that degree that the garden can give her. But even this freedom is strictly limited by the walls, surrounding the garden. The stone boundary which encircles the two lovers in the present scene foreshadows another confine which is going to unite them forever – the tomb; Juliet herself unconsciously predicts their mutual fate: “The orchard walls are high and hard to climb, And the place death” (II, 2) [4]. But what seems only the omen, becomes inevitability after the second and third garden scenes (Act III, 2; 5). The garden becomes for Juliet the witness, assistant, interlocutor and accomplice; the more she separates from her formerly beloved and trusted Nurse, the more frank she becomes in her monologues addressed to the garden beneath her window. While the garden itself talks about the sweetness of love, inviting her into the smooth and balmy darkness of the summer night, full of singing of birds, soft moonlight and sweet fragrance of flowers, her love and life are threatened by the hatred and violence raging outside this enchanted space.

The third scene involving the garden setting is the climax one for the plot. This time the lovers are finally together, in “an open Gallery to Juliet’s Chamber, overlooking the Garden” [4]. This time we, the viewers, are in the garden beneath the balcony, like Romeo used to be, overhearing what is said in the gallery. Whether a balcony or a gallery it was, both locations are characterized by its distinctly transitional position – it is a place between the house and the garden, both connecting and separating them, which shows the tragically indeterminate situation of the lovers – between the Montagues and the Capulets, between love and death...

The third garden scene presents a reverted reflection of a similar one from second Act. There Romeo moves towards Juliet – first into the garden from the perilous outer space, then closer to the balcony to hear what his beloved one is saying. Scene 5 of Act III presents the opposite movement – from Juliet in the gallery into the garden, then into the hostile world, never to return again. The rhetoric structure of the scene also resembles the one of their first talk: they argue lovingly, before – about the extent of each other’s love, this time about the signs of either night fading or day dawning – the singing of birds (a lark or a nightingale?) and a source of light (the moon or the morning sun?).

All the garden scenes involve and accentuate a vertical direction of the scenic visualization of the performance,

which was already introduced in the first garden scene with the balcony episode (Romeo talks, looks and strives upwards, while Juliet does the same in the opposite direction, thus creating a strong emotional vector connecting the upper and the lower levels of the stage). Though there's no certainty among the scholars about the involvement of the "balcony" (a gallery above the stage, generally housing the musicians, sometimes used as a symbolic representation of "heaven"), for modern audience the balcony episode has become an essential element of the tragedy, practically its brand. The balcony (or, technically, a gallery), in the spatial semiotics of the scenery associated with "heaven", can be interpreted within the play as the state of bliss and innocence Juliet is supposed to have been in before partaking the forbidden fruit (of love and passion). The lower level of the setting (where Romeo is positioned) can be seen as representation of the Fall (descension) and exile from Paradise which leads to suffering and death – the fate waiting for the heroine after abandoning virginity.

The connection of the space below the balcony with some equivalent of the underworld or the darkness of the grave is hinted at in the third garden scene (the leave-taking in the balcony), when Juliet says to a departing Romeo: "Methinks I see thee, now thou art below / As one dead in the bottom of a tomb" (III, 4) [4]. Actually from this moment on the universe around the young couple seems to start collapsing which is depicted as a series of calamities and disasters: a shadow of the epidemic intruding their plans, involvement of dark magic or sorcery required to solve the predicaments but predictably further intensifying them; appearance of a wretched and degraded apothecary as a grotesque and derisive doppelganger of Friar Lawrence and at the same time the embodiment of the failure of humanist philosophy and abused natural philosophy and science etc. The events are speeding up and getting more complicated within the play, imparting to the audience the sense of dark foreboding, eventually resolving in the final catastrophe and the protagonists' death. The next embodiment of the garden the audience sees in the play is the garden of death – the churchyard with "yew-trees" mentioned by Paris and the funeral flowers for Juliet's tomb instead of lusty and sensual

roses of her adolescent passion. Thus the playwright creates a kind of mirror compositional pattern within the play: the image of the garden appears at the very beginning of the play and reappears in the new function at its end, following the development of the plot, eventually turning from mere background image into the key symbol of the whole tragedy and an emblem of protagonists' love and fate.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Shakespeare enriches a traditional (even trivial) poetic and theatrical topos – the garden – with new and unobvious dimensions and contexts, turning it from a scenic cliché setting into a powerful and versatile symbol that is closely connected not only with the imagery of this play and his other writings, but also with semiotic language of Elizabethan stage and, even wider, poetic tradition and philosophy of the Renaissance. Artfully exploiting even the very limitations of the staging of his time, Shakespeare infuses new vigour to the scenic conventions (which the garden setting definitely belonged to), generating wider possibilities of their interpretation.

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