

Unbinding Genre (Bending Gender): Parody in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)***Wajih Ayed**Head of the Department of English
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Tunisia**Abstract:**

Mourning becomes Shakespeare, perhaps; celebration too. *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) and *Othello* (1604) are tragedies of sweeping passion and rash action where love falters and lovers fall. In her 1988 play entitled *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, Ann-Marie MacDonald parodies the two Shakespearean texts and visits the intersections between genre and gender where tragedy modulates into comedy and liminal gender identities fade in and out across permeable genre spaces. The protagonist of the play, Constance Ledbelly, is sucked into the wonderland of her unconscious mind where she outwits her opponents, Iago and Tybalt, and moderates the extremes of her avatars, Desdemona and Juliet. She thus breaks free from her stalking shadow, Night the Professor, and realises that she is the unwitting author of the play. Her unconscious leap onto the stages of mourning becomes a farewell to the night, and a greeting of the morning that becomes the queerness of the postmodernist world—laughing off its past and laughing at its present. The golden pen which Constance finds at the end of her toying with genre, language, and gender is a reward for the author who takes refuge in a world where the fool of court is king of wit, and where the pandemonium of tragedy becomes the playground of parody. The author of this paper studies the alchemy of Constance's change and MacDonald's reconsideration of genre and gender through parody, the postmodern philosopher's stone. He also argues for a politics of identity revisiting the aesthetics of mourning.

Key Words: comedy, gender, identity, parody, subversion, tragedy

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“[T]he outcome, if successful, in both alchemy and individuation is a union of opposites [...] leading to alchemical gold, the philosopher’s stone, the elixir of life, or, in Jungian terms, the Self.”

—Gary Lachman, *Jung the Mystic*, p. 158

Introduction

Written by the award-winning Canadian playwright, actress, and novelist Ann-Marie MacDonald (1958—), *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* is a postmodernist reconsideration of William Shakespeare’s *Othello* (1604) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1597). While it borrows the names of its title characters from these Shakespearean tragedies, MacDonald’s play (which premiered in Toronto in 1988) complicates its generic affiliation through parody. Before its subversive potential can be gauged, parody needs an initial theoretical frame as an aesthetic device. Dismissing Jameson’s critiques while insisting on its difference from pastiche, Hutcheon (2000) has defined postmodernist parody as “a form of imitation” marked by “ironic inversion” and by a measure of “critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity” (p. 6). *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* is a farewell to tragedy in *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*, but for this parody to fare well in the realms of comedy, an appropriate context for its imitation of and departure from the tragedies parodied must be established by the audience.

1. Goodnight Tragedy (Good Morning Comedy)

The title of MacDonald’s play evokes its Shakespearean referents and creates the need for some familiarity with the stories of the heroines. “The parodist,” as a matter of fact, “addresses a highly ‘knowing’ and literate audience” who can take the critical distance necessary to trigger the ironic potential of inversion (Childs and Fowler 2006). While this parodic “activation of the past,” as Hutcheon (2000) has astutely noted, gives it “a new and often ironic context, it makes a similar demand on the reader [’s] knowledge and recollection” (p. 5). MacDonald’s expectations would accommodate the readers, spectators, or viewers with minimal knowledge of the characters and plots of the parodied tragedies, but only the ‘knowing’ reader (or spectator, or viewer) can measure the distance marked by irony and experience the impact of its inversion. This critical distance increases in proportion to the informed audience’s familiarity with Shakespearean scenes, *dramatis personae*, and scripts. Only they can realise when bathos displaces pathos and anti-climax replaces its more anticipated opposite. In *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, most characters are drawn from the two plays parodied, but their speeches, actions, and relationships are ironically bent. So is the dramatic structure, which explores alternative trajectories for the plots to rework the Shakespearean ore and transform it through the alchemy of parody.

1.1. Dramatic Structure, Parodic Inversion

The dramatic structures of *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* are both subject to “parodic play by the plot” (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 14). The basis of this ironic visitation is a questioning of the structural norms of tragedy as a genre that is traditionally pitted against comedy because it presents the fall of the flawed hero as a necessary, if not as a wholly deserved punishment. Far from the common misconceptions about the rigidity of genre topology in Early Modern English drama, boundaries between tragedy and comedy at that time were permeable (Snyder, 1970, p.

392) because genres for Shakespeare's contemporaries were rather flexible "sets of expectations and possibilities" (Orgel, 1979, p. 123). The parodist taps the elements in *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* which lean towards comedy.

This is how the postmodernist play begins—not with a prank, but with a murder. When the curtain is raised, three mimes are concurrently presented *in medias res*. Othello smothers Desdemona with a pillow; Juliet commits suicide with Romeo's rapier; Constance Ledbelley resigns her position as an assistant professor of literature at Queen's University, throws her research assets into the dustbin, and leaves her office (MacDonald, 1998, p. 5). The three vignettes portend tragedy, with the murder of an innocent, the self-immolation of a teenager, and the metaphorical suicide of an academic. These deaths paint the colour of blood on the peak of the tragic pyramid, in perfect accord with the classical norms of tragedy. The *d'après* pattern is indeed set in what initially appears to unfold as a pastiche, rather than a parody of the Bard's two tragedies. For the readers of the play, the bleak, dumb show flirts with situational irony because the vivacious front cover page would have evoked a different view. For its spectators and viewers, however, parody is not operational yet because the playwright has so far only replicated established generic conventions. Romeo's rashness kills Juliet, jealousy takes Desdemona's life, and egoism destroys Constance's career; parody, however, saves their lives.

For Constance, the writing is in the dustbin. Parodying the solemn demeanour and grim prophecies of the Chorus in *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare, trans. 2009b, 1.1.1-11), his postmodern counterpart in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* enters her office *ex machina*, indecorously lights a cigarette, then casually speaks. Directly addressing the audience, he says that Mercury has steered the academic's stars to clement regions, so that she now has a second chance to undergo "a double-edged re-birthday" and find "the key to her Philosopher's Stone" (MacDonald, 1998, p. 6). Still, the rising action only makes her bend lower; indeed, as Act 1 begins, Constance is on the brink of meeting the fate ominously enacted in the dumb show. In her unfinished thesis, she argues that the two Shakespearean plays were initially comedies which the playwright turned into tragedies when he eliminated the Fool, that comic mouthpiece of wisdom who obviates tragedy (p. 14).¹ She then postulates that he consigned the secret to his (fictional) friend Gustav the Alchemist who encrypted it in the manuscript which she has been trying to decode for years (p. 17). For years, too, her supervisor, Professor Claude Night has been pulling the soft wool of romance over her credulous eyes, but only to pull the rug from under her feet in the end. When he visits his supervisee for the last time, he breaks her heart and wrecks her small expectations. Not only is he getting engaged to Ramona, a young student of his, but he is also taking a lecturing position at Oxford which Constance was hoping to obtain (p. 19). Heartbroken and hopeless, she is about to resign her job, abandon her thesis, and throw the tome of doom into the dustbin when, looking at an inscription on its cover, she experiences her first epiphany. Arrested as if by magic, she reads an injunction to find her "true identity," and to "discover who the Author [of the two plays might] be" (p. 22). Her fate is suspended, and tragedy is given a respite.

As she stoops to pick up three pages which have fallen into the wastebasket, she is pulled into the wonderland of her unconscious (MacDonald, 1998, p. 22), where, as the Chorus has announced, she can face her worst nightmares and turn them into her best dream. In an

alternative mindscape where *Othello* is performed, she prevents Iago from successfully seducing his general into strangling his wife. In the nick of time, she interrupts the fateful scene in the Shakespearean tragedy where the ensign instructs the general not to poison Desdemona, but to

[IAGO hands a pillow to OTHELLO]

IAGO. *Strangle her in bed.*

CONSTANCE. No!

[Both IAGO and OTHELLO turn and stare at her, amazed]

Um . . . you're about to make a terrible mistake . . . m'Lord. (p. 24)

The Canadian girl in *Othello*'s citadel pulls her courage together and Desdemona's handkerchief from Iago's hose, thereby bearing out his treachery and bringing in not only an anti-climax to the plot, but also to the false Venetian a humbling punishment as a latrine cleaning servant. Having spared them the sting of jealousy, the grateful couple befriend Constance. To her surprise, she discovers that Desdemona cannot be farther from the Mona Lisa, the patriarchal ideal of femininity, and that Othello cannot be nearer the stereotype of "the *miles gloriosus*, or braggart soldier" (Djordjevic, 2003, p. 95), the genitor of all lies. Tragedy is diluted in bathos and the play even leans towards melodrama when Othello and Desdemona delight in their love while Iago stews in his punishment.

The jealousy plot of *Othello* is ironically replicated for the second time when Iago musters the demons of his wit to turn Desdemona against Constance for her alleged wooing of the Moor by means of magic. Moved by revenge, the demoted ensign explains the visitor's odd behaviour and anachronisms as parts of her supposed plan to marry Othello. Desdemona is eventually taken in by his plotting and takes up the general's lines (repeated verbatim or with some changes) from the Shakespearean tragedy (MacDonald, pp. 47-49). She is even made to see a fake proof when Othello shows his guest a necklace which he actually intends to present to his wife. Iago makes Desdemona mistake the pendant for a gift proffered to Constance. *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* pitches into tragedy, however, when the jealous Venetian (mimicking the absent Moor) nearly stifles the unwitting Canadian to death. Clutching at a straw, Constance produces the necklace, and, seeing the inscription engraved on it, Desdemona releases her (p. 81). Through parody, the classic pyramidal structure of tragedy is deprived of a climax, just like Othello's forged pyramid yarn. Constance is initially horrified at the swerve that the plotline has taken: She "wrecked a masterpiece" and "ruined the play," thus turning "Shakespeare's *Othello* to a farce" (p. 25).² Little does Constance know that she is about to turn another tragedy into a comedy.

The structure of *Romeo and Juliet* is likewise remodelled through parody. At the beginning of Act 3, Constance finds herself a witness of the fateful duel between Mercutio and Tybalt. Deciding to intervene, she herself ironizes, "[o]ne Mona Lisa down, and one to go" (MacDonald, 1998, p. 50). She interrupts the fight and brings to a standstill the tragic train. When the infuriated duellers demand answers about her identity and the reason for her intrusion, she surprises everyone by saying:

CONSTANCE. A stranger here, my name is Constan—tine.

I couldn't let you kill each other for,
 young Juliet and Romeo have wed;
 and by th'untying of their virgin-knot,
 have tied new blood betwixt you cousins here. (p. 50)

Revealing the young couple's union is the shortest way to short-circuit tragedy, but neither the Friar nor the Nurse dares it in *Romeo and Juliet*. As Constance does the office of the wise Fool, her spontaneous involvement in the scene brings the duel to a friendly conclusion and the duellers to the bathhouse. Also, it ends the generational feud between the two gentle houses of Verona. The tragic climax is ironically mirrored for the second time in the boneyard. When Tybalt resolves to rid the city of the alien, the odds are clearly against Constance, who is no match for the rapier expert. Yelping and vainly trying to escape this fox trap, her fate seems sealed. Wearing Juliet's clothes, Romeo timely intervenes and Tybalt's sword, "rather than skewering CONSTANCE under ROMEO's arm, gets caught in the flowing fabric of ROMEO's dress" (p. 75). Tragedy is once again averted, and, once again, the psyche traveler escapes.

As Constance meddles with the plots of *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*, dramatic action sidelines the tragic crescendo of inevitability and keeps disaster at bay. Rejecting the necessity of reversal in *Romeo and Juliet*, Snyder (1970) asserts that it "becomes, rather than is, tragic;" as a matter of fact, she argues that the change of fortunes in the play "is so radical as to constitute a change of genre: the action and the characters begin in familiar comic patterns, and are then transformed—or discarded—to compose the pattern of tragedy" (p. 391, emphasis added). Likewise denying the necessity of reversal in the two Shakespearean plays, Orgel (1979) aptly notes that "[m]uch of their dramatic force derives from the way they continually tempt us with comic possibilities" (p. 122). He further contends that "[w]e are told in a prologue that Romeo and Juliet are star-crossed, but if inevitability is a requisite of tragedy, neither play will qualify for the genre" for "they are the most iffy dramas in the Shakespearean canon" (Orgel, p. 122). In each of the reworked plotlines, incremental dramatic tension nearly brings about the conventional tragic climax, but then takes a sudden dive towards a parodic reversal that saves, rather than destroys the hero. For each of the hypotexts, the tragic dramatic structure is mimicked to the fringe of catastrophe and then turned upside down—with the resulting bathos of comic relief, rather than the pathos of tragic downfall. If the incremental tragic swell of the play is punctured by the ironic anti-climaxes of the plot, *dramatis personae* are likewise suitably remodeled in the parodic mode.

1.2. *Desdemona and Juliet Are Not Dead*

Hutcheon's succinct comments on *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* lend themselves with ease to *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*. "Whenever an event is directly taken from the Shakespearean model," she asserts, "[Tom] Stoppard uses the original words," and then "'trans-contextualizes' them through his addition of scenes that the Bard never conceived" (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 14). MacDonald's editing of the scripts of the *dramatis personae* in the hypertext further augments its ironic distance from its hypotexts. The dramatist 'trans-contextualises' (parts of) lines and speeches reprised from Shakespeare, but she also re-contextualises these or reassigns them to other speakers.³ Notably, parts of Othello's long dialogue with Iago in the hypotext (Shakespeare, trans. 2009a, 3.3.100-287) are given to

Desdemona, who is deceived by the disgraced ensign's scheming against Constance in the hypertext (MacDonald, 1998, pp. 38-45). These instances of intertextuality result in the extension of the scripts of, mainly, Desdemona and Juliet at the expense of, mainly, Othello and Iago.⁴

The conventional representations of male heroes and villains in the Shakespearean hypotexts as proactive, potent, and rational are passed over to women in MacDonald's parody. Professor Night is affected, arrogant, selfish, and dishonest. A liar to academia, he has built a career of plagiarised secrets shared only by his prescript muse and indentured scribe, Constance. A wolf in a sheep's clothing, he is ready to appropriate the findings of her thesis (MacDonald, 1998, pp. 16-17). He also sadistically taunts his supervisee with the diamond ring which he shows her but intends for Ramona (p. 19). A liar too is Othello. No sooner does he begin the proud narrative of his marvellous adventures in fantastic worlds that he is interrupted by Constance, who says that she knows them already; in an aside, Iago mockingly adds, "([s]o know we all the wag and swagger of this tale" (p. 26). When the Moor of Venice brags of the 'ingenious' stratagem of the "pyramid on wheels" in which he supposedly hid his men to take by surprise the unsuspecting Turks in Egypt, Constance cannot help protesting that it "sounds like Troy," to which Iago in a second aside acidly adds that it is "[n]ot [like] Troy, but false." As for Iago, one of Shakespeare's arch-villains, his rhetoric-saturated poison finds its antidote in Constance's candid assertion of truth (p. 24) and pragmatic show of the necklace (p. 81). Deflated as a villain who meets his just punishment as a latrine cleaner, the comic effect of his humiliation is heightened by the audience's knowledge of, and expectations from the character in the source play (Djordjevic, 2003, p. 99). This poetic justice is an ironic catalyst of melodrama, rather than tragedy.

The Shakespearean aesthetics of plot, character, and speech can arguably be seen to be parodied through reshuffles of script, variations of distance, and inversions of structure. These updates to the hypotext do not only complicate the dramatic genre of the hypertext, but also interrogate its intersections with the considerations of gender in the metatext. If there is truth in the claim that drama has been a male-dominated aesthetic field, there must be more credibility to the claim that tragedy has been the *chasse gardée* of patriarchy. Predominantly male dramatists have indeed scripted tragedies where challenges to orthodox gender roles and spheres threaten the community and therefore bring about exemplary punishment. Antigone, Cleopatra, and Clytemnestra may be the most relevant illustrations of women who committed agency and incurred the wrath of the patriarchal idols. Constance, the remote descendant of these women, receives a more clement treatment in the script of MacDonald, the remote descendant of the women who were denied the sacred fire of writing. The author *in* the play and the author *of* the parody radically depart from gender-biased patriarchy. To the ('informed') readers, the cover page promises a programme of re-presentation.

2. Gender Bending and Gender Parody

The layered image on the front cover of the 1998 print edition of the play is a graphic *collage* which sets the tone for gender parody. The Bard's iconic portrait sinks to the bottom of the artefact, bathed in an eerie light blue. Superimposed on his right eye is an insert from Alexej Von Jawlensky's Expressionist painting, "Mosaic" (1913); the left eye and lips are borrowed

from what appears to be the photo of a woman. Superposed on the background painting, these sensual inserts blur Shakespeare's gender identity and stratify the visual field where his perception was conventionally recognised and validated. These are female eyes that replace his, perhaps to change the opaque pearls with translucent diamonds; and these are cynic lips that gloss over his, perhaps to reveal a secret that the nether ones kept untold. This spectral portrait unmakes the bonds of monochrome gender. Defiantly hermaphrodite, as a matter of fact, its composite corporeality sees through polychrome eyes vibrant with colour and provocative with an inviting challenge. The function of this cover art paratext is proleptically parodic.

2.1. I Sing the Gender Fluid

Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) questions the rigid patriarchal gender roles encoded in its hypotexts and proposes gender fluidity as an alternative process of subjectivity. In the prologue, the Chorus praises Mercury, "that changing element, / portrayed as Gemini, hermaphrodite and twin" (MacDonald, 1998, p. 6). Coupled with the explicit and implicit references to Carl Gustav Jung's analytical psychology,⁵ this allusion evokes the latter's theory of the collective unconscious, particularly with reference to his concept of *anima*, or the female component in a man, and its mirror archetype, *animus*, the male component in a woman (Lachman, 2013, p. 94). The Chorus's gay promises will eventually be fulfilled. At the end of Act 2, Scene 2, Constance miraculously flees Cyprus and the fury of jealous Desdemona through a timely science-fiction warp. However, she leaves without her skirt, which the revenge-minded Venetian has impaled on her rapier. Fortuitous as it is, this incident will significantly impact gender identities in the play.

Constance lands in Verona, in the middle of the duel that seals Romeo's fate. Wearing longjohns, but without a skirt, she is taken for a boy, an opportune mistake which Constance readily embraces:

CONSTANCE. [*A moment of decision. She clears her throat to a more masculine pitch*]

From Cyprus washed I here ashore,
a roving pedant lad to earn my bread
by wit and by this fountain pen, my sword. (MacDonald, 1998, p. 50)

Posing as an itinerant male academic, the intruder brandishes her small, green sword which nevertheless fends off the violence of duellers high on patriarchy. Through Mercury, this Venus is reborn as Apollo in Verona. Thanks to her improvised "stylization of the body" (Butler, 1990, p. 421) in terms of masculine phonic and sartorial norms, Constance waxes out of her given somatic mould and follows the curves of bent gender identifications.

Her politic assumption of masculinity notwithstanding, the steady quester makes both Romeo and Juliet fall in love with her at first sight. Weary of his wife, Romeo declares his flame to masked Constance in the masque in Capulet's mansion:

ROMEO. Speak not of Juliet, 'tis thee I love.

CONSTANCE. What?

[ROMEO drops to one knee and seizes her hand]

ROMEO. O Constantine, O emperor of my heart!

It is my sex that is thine enemy.

Call me but love, and I'll be new endowed. (MacDonald, 1998, p. 61)

In spite of his biological sex, Romeo offers to divest himself of his given gender in exchange for Constantine's returned sexual love. His 'straight' sexual orientation bending, he crosses the gender Rubicon when he uses a queer innuendo to express his newfound bent for feminine endowment; as a matter of fact, he kneels, begging the transvestite woman to "quench myself at thy Priapic font" (p. 62) and wishing he were "a fountain pen within thy hand" ready to "spurt forth streams of eloquence at thy command" (p. 63). At the climax of this scene prolific with same-sex erotic fantasies, transgender Romeo moves on Constantine and actually kisses 'him.' His bid on bedding the 'Greek' beauty is foiled by his Veronese wife, however—which intensifies the frustration of his feeling of sexual inadequacy.

Set to win Constantine's love, forlorn Romeo resolves to don "a woman's gown" to the end of his days (MacDonald, 1998, p. 65), so he wears Juliet's clothes and calls on the *kouros* at night. "[*Softly, from off,*]" Romeo squeaks, "Constantine [...] it is I, *Romiet*" (p. 72, emphasis added), a parodic name diminutively shrinking *Romeo* and conveniently rhyming with *Juliet*. This self-styling androgynous subject of desire dresses, acts, and speaks in a manner considered by his patriarchal community to be constitutive of femininity.⁶ He also calls himself by a hybrid name that mocks his own, as well as the very notion of a stable identity moored in flimsy affixations of external signifiers of gender identity. Fulfilling his promise to be "*new endowed*" (p. 61), gender-queer Romeo adopts a hybrid identity styled after his newfound bisexual orientation. He thus becomes a drag queen with a fluid and dynamic gender identity. In imitating Juliet, Romeo-as-drag, "implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency" (Butler, 1990, p. 418). Transvestite and transgender, 'Romiet' stages a transhistoricised burlesque of gender ontology as mere travesty posing as performance.

This Apollo is to Juliet what heat is to ice. Love-struck at first sight, the pining beauty sighs, "[t]he Greek hath taught not just the world to see, / but also me" (MacDonald, 1998, p. 63). She is so infatuated with 'him' that 'his' resistance only fuels her desire. Mistaking 'his' admission that 'he' has been trying to "penetrate your [pre-Shakespearean literary] source" (p. 64), for a declaration of love instead of 'his' desire to decode the Gustav code, Juliet retorts, "I'd have thee penetrate my secret source, / and know me full as well and deep as thou / dost know thyself O dreamer, Constantine" (p. 64). When Romeo comes back to the dance and leads 'the Greek boy,' Juliet thinks that the perpendicular "slant of Constantine's desire" is "to match his stick to light his fire" (p. 65). Seeing him gay, she still decides to pay him a visit, dressed as Romeo. This gender fluidity goes on in Act 3, Scene 5, a parody of the orchard scene in *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare, trans. 2009b, 2.2.), which has been celebrated as the classic *locus amandi* of heteronormative romantic love.

Still a drag king, Constance is on her balcony, and Juliet is below, now also a drag king pining (slightly modified) lines which her lover says in Shakespeare's play: "*But soft! What light*

through yonder window breaks? / It is the East, and Constantine the sun” (MacDonald, 1998, p. 67). When ‘the Greek boy’ asks if this is Romeo, she replies,

JULIET. *I know not how to tell thee who I am.
My sex, dear boy, is hateful to myself,
because it is an enemy to thee;
therefore I wear tonight, this boyish hose.* (p. 67)

Aroused beyond patience, Juliet’s roving desire turns her into a transgender subject whose cross-dressing is only the outward expression of her inward gender expansiveness. Juliet’s visit denudes the artificiality of cisgender identities. As the two transvestites tread on brittle ground where sex and gender are intertwined, the orchard of their desires is visited by new gatherers of different fruits. When Constantine declines Juliet’s *demande d’amour*, she calls ‘him’ “a deviant” (p. 68), but even when ‘he’ protests that ‘he’ is straight, Juliet pursues her wooing, offering an alternative venue for his pleasure. Framed by genre parody, this extended drag scene shreds the gender ontology of Shakespeare’s lovers into shifty gender games, now king, now queen—but ever crowing desire sovereign.

Heterosexual normativity in the parodied Shakespearean plays fails to deliver sustainable gender ontologies which survive the test of desire, unadulterated by cultural constraints. Thanks to the work of parody in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, “we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity” (Butler, 1990, p. 418). This doing and undoing of gender comes to a head when Juliet’s despair makes her attempt a suicide, forcing Constantine to admit that ‘he’ is a woman (MacDonald, 1998, p. 77). This revelation does not trouble Juliet and rather relocates her desire into a same-sex sphere. Realising that her culture’s sanctified gender relations will block her reconfigured sexual orientation, she forestalls rejection and complains that her “[u]nsanctified desire” is “more tragic far / than any star-crossed love ’twixt boy and girl!” (p. 77), a recast allusion to Shakespeare’s stellar metaphor.

Although Constance denies any filiation with Lesbos, Juliet breaks the glass ceiling of orthodox gender relations when she pleads to be taken to the curvy shores of the island, there to lay on the sands inland and make Sapphic hymns to their ecstasy (MacDonald, 1998, pp. 77-78). She coaxes Constance into rekindling the ambers of her repressed homosexuality, which she nearly sets ablaze when she invitingly reclines, offering herself to her partner’s groping hands. Although she has been led in love and sex, Constance now leads the erotic encounter. This “sexual stylization of butch/femme sexual identities,” to invoke Butler (1990) once again, parodies the “notion of an original and primary gender identity” (p. 418). The scene would plausibly be seen to encode a second-degree irony because the two transvestite women discover their lesbian desire only when dressed as men. The erotic crescendo is abruptly interrupted, however, when Constance finds “a Manuscript page” (MacDonald, 1998, p. 79) in Juliet’s shirt telling her to retrieve Desdemona.⁷

The hilarious misrecognitions and *quid pro quos* resulting from gender-bending in Act 3 expose the fragility of cisgender masculine/feminine categories, and also the provisional nature

of all gender production. Gender-binary identities are seen to depend on the sustainability of value judgements of the kind that a reactionary like Tybalt makes: For him, the ‘Greek’ is “a deviant” (MacDonald, 1998, p. 62), a “[h]ermaphrodite,” (p. 74) and an “inverted nature” (p. 83). These sex-based instruments of profiling and slander pave the way for his attempt to kill Constance at the end of the play. The murderous plot gives credence to Butler’s claim that “gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences” (1990, p. 420). For Tybalt, Constantine’s fashioning of her gender is so disturbing that it can only have mortuary consequences. These are averted by ruse—and through parodic inversion.

Through the reversed viewpoint of parody, dominant gender discourses and practices appear to be constructed, performed, repeated, and imposed in ways that make permanent their contingency and transparent their opacity. Without pressure, gender *doxa* cannot hide the fissures subtending its dissonant texture, so its paradoxes lose any seeming logic and beg for laughter. Withdrawing from the solemn heads of Verona to meet the grinning skulls of the boneyard, Tybalt’s *alpha* patriarchy is shaken and in need for external validation. Indeed, traumatised by Constantine’s sexual appeal to his cousins, Tybalt is anxious to measure the size of the stranger’s penis, for fear lest the other should possess the Phallus. When he is interrupted by ‘Romiet,’ he forcibly carries ‘him’ away, presumably a rapist. In *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, heteronormative gender ontology is “put into crisis by the performance of gender in such a way that these judgments are undermined or become impossible to make” (Butler, 2004, p. 214). By ridiculing Tybalt, parody unbinds subjects of desire heretofore manacled by rusty judgements. Once the repressive architecture of gender roles and relations is undone through parody, as in the cases of Romeo, Constance, and Juliet, the “temporal and contingent groundlessness” (Butler, 1990, p. 421) of gender identities appears as an accessory of political expediency maintaining the existing power imbalance between the two culturally recognised categories in favour of masculinity. Gender-bending unbinds *both* gender and genre.

2.2. *I Am Constance, ‘Come from the Dead’*

When the play begins, conquered Constance is at the feet of the victor. Professor Night’s final visitation leaves her devastated. Her intimate life was an appositive clause in a passionless play which was ruined when the man that she had expected would be her lover for life stole away. Her dream job was stolen also by the false academic, and her thesis came to stasis when the Gustav Manuscript kept secret the identity of the Author. In academia, she is ‘the Mouse’ to her students and ‘Connie’ to her colleagues (MacDonald, 1998, p. 30). She is the literal and figurative ‘pet’ of her supervisor, who patronisingly pats on her head to show his satisfaction. During her jolly unconscious peregrinations in Cyprus and Verona, however, she gathers pages unbound from the Manuscript and meets the women who bring her closer to the object of her quest, the identity of the Fool who turns tragedy into comedy and who bends alienation into identity.

When she first meets Desdemona, Constance introduces herself as “an academic” who “comes from Queen’s” (MacDonald, 1998, p. 27). She is mistaken for a Pedant, from the land of Academe, which is “ruled by mighty Queens, / a race of Amazons who brook no men” (p. 29). Her reality cannot be farther from this fiction. In her first moment of recognition, guilty Constance confesses to Desdemona that she has been writing reviews and articles for her

supervisor which “he would have writ himself” (p. 36) and thus “helped him in deceiving Queen’s” (p. 37). Moved to compassion, Constance’s new Venetian friend tells her that she has been “ten years an inky slave in paper chains” (p. 36) whose “eyes were shrouded by the demon Night” (p. 37), then promises to help her find the object of her desire. They both rally in the indecorous and bathetic battle cry, “Bullshit!” (p. 38). In her embittered soliloquy, later on, she looks back at her life, realising how little esteem her students and colleagues have shown her and vows vengeance (pp. 45-46), thereby resolving to initiate action for the first time in the play. Her duel with Tybalt nearly costs her dearly however (p. 75), so she learns to be sly enough to throw dust in his eyes by feigning death (p. 82), her supposedly just reward.

After her erotic proximity to Romeo and Juliet, and after her close call with Desdemona and Tybalt, Constance moves from passivity to a measure of individuating agency. Meeting the Venetian lady’s mortuary invitation and the Veronese teenager’s suicidal injunction with “nay ... both of you” (MacDonald, 1998, p. 86), she squarely rejects the extremes parodied in the play. She is then able to bluntly speak with them, telling Desdemona that she is “gullible and violent” and Juliet that she is “more in love with death, ’cause death is easier to love” (p. 86). They suitably realise their excesses, admit that she speaks wisely, and swear “to live by questions, not by their solution” (p. 87). In her final epiphany, Constance ascertains that *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* “were [originally] comedies after all,” that she is the Fool, and that “[t]he Fool and the Author are one and the same” (p. 87). Uncanny understage laughter by the Chorus/*Hamlet*’s ghost resounds as she delightedly recognises her newfound agency. She is presented with a scroll and a golden pen, but her most precious reward is the well-deserved greeting expressed in unison by Desdemona and Juliet, “[h]appy birthday, Constance” (p. 88). Now addressed by name, not by demonyms or diminutives, the mind traveller reaches a heightened level of dignity and an increased measure of agency. It is through her constant redefinition of her relationships with her *animus* and *anima* that Constance negotiates her identity.

Through parody, Constance’s encounters with her two *alter egos* make her swing between extremes of identification until she herself finally becomes the element of mercury under the sign of Gemini. Before the curtain falls, the Chorus comes back, commenting on the academic’s progress, then the players dance. Still, the festive ending should not suggest that all is or will be well. There is no happy *dénouement* for the parrot, the turtle, or the Turk’s head. The two pets incur the disfiguring playfulness of humans, become symbols of helplessness, and then fade out of the script. Carrier of “a looting list” (MacDonald, 1998, p. 35), the ‘heathen’ head is an ironic comment on its own status as the trophy of a ‘villain’ plucked from his dead body, then tossed casually out of discursivity. The acid of parody does not dissolve the immoderate violence done to human and inhuman others.

Now ‘looking awry’ at the dominant ontologies of genre and gender from the slanted perspective of parody, Constance can change and face the other ideological forcefields setting higher, yet invisible ceilings. She will probably be able to come back to academia as a passionate scholar who will no longer look through the eyes of the dumb, nor give credit to the despicable, or destroy the books of the academics. She may also avert the tragedy of subjection to the avid capitalist commercialism marketing light cigarettes and beer for credulous consumers. Her newfound philosopher’s stone may help turn greedy academics into generous intellectuals who

will no longer “each other eat” (Shakespeare, trans. 2009a, 1.3.157) or prey upon the work of supervisees and non-tenured colleagues.

Conclusion

Although it initially seems a contemporary adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* invests in the tragic as a threatening inevitability, but only to reinvest it with mere potentiality. Revisited through parody, the two Shakespearean plays depart from tragedy to flirt with comedy. MacDonald ironically comments on traditional representations of genre and gender, the crossing of which in her play stimulates a queer parody of generic conventions and sexual orientations. As a (radical) comedy, the postmodernist play parodies its Shakespearean hypotexts, lays bare the iffiness of their codes, and celebrates alternative venues of their reconfiguration. The conventional dramatic structure of tragedy is given the lie, like Othello’s monsters. The binary pair *comedy/tragedy* is triangulated through parody almost into a problem play. The excesses of her Jungian avatars, Desdemona and Juliet, are moderated into a more refined subjectivity. Likewise, the pair *masculine/feminine* is triangulated through gender parody into a fluid category where desire is porous, protean, and permeable.

The passage from play to praxis is a shift from aesthetics to politics. *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* is redeemed from tragedy by its parody of the pyramidal structure and its invalidation of the inevitability pattern. Through its enmeshment with the identity politics of postmodernism, the cisgender aesthetics of the parodied Shakespearean plays is reinscribed by a celebration of the queer that becomes Constance’s creative quest for identity. The textual intersections between genre and gender open interstices in dominant ideologies, ones that parody widens and underscores. Parody is for MacDonald an aesthetic frame for her deglamorization of tragedy and liberation of authorship. For Constance, it is the mode of her quest for identity whereby she puts suicide at bay and desire at hand. This is the actual alchemy that turns the past participle *led* to the infinitive *lead* and refines the substantive *lead*, the base metal used in cheap pencils into the substantial *golden* fountain pen of self-fashioning.

Endnotes

¹ Surprising as it may be, Constance’s thesis statement finds unconditional support in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1599?). Indeed, the presence of such a character uncovers Don John’s scheme to indict Hero of adultery, thereby saving the lady and bringing her in marriage to her lover, Claudio. Dogberry’s comic malapropisms aside, his fortuitous arrest of Don John’s henchmen and the consequent revelation of Hero’s innocence avert certain tragedy and effectively turn the play into a comedy.

² These instances of *metatextuality* are ironic because Constance is saying the contrary of what she postulates in her thesis. Her evocation of the farce establishes a relationship of *architextuality* with the *hypotext*. The words italicised are parts of Gerard Genette’s concept of *transtextuality*, which he defines as the “*textual transcendence*” of a text, or “everything that brings it into relation with other texts” (1992, p. 81, emphasis in the original). Genette (1992) identifies five types of relationships, namely, *intertextuality*, or “the literal presence of one text within another” (pp. 81-82); *paratextuality*, which involves the relationships of the text with “its paratext: a title, a subtitle, intertitles; prefaces, postfaces, notices, forewords, etc.” (1997, p. 3);

metatextuality, or the “relationship that links a commentary to the text it comments on” (1992, p. 82); *hypertextuality*, which describes “any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary” (1997, p. 5); and *architextuality*, a term that designates “the relationship of inclusion that links each text to the various types of discourses [or genres] it belongs to” (1992, p. 82).

³ The hypotext and the hypertext are typographically marked. Quotes from Shakespeare come in italics in the 1998 edition, yet many are reassigned to other characters or transposed in different situations. For example, Constance’s fictional homeland, Academe (MacDonald, 1998, p. 37), becomes the lair of the cannibals about whom Othello talks (Shakespeare, trans. 2009a, 1.3.157).

⁴ Some emblematic lines and speeches are “reassigned and reshuffled among the characters—a technique that elicits laughter through absurd incongruity” (Djordjevic, 2003, p. 101). Only the perfectly informed spectators or viewers are concerned by this remark. Cued by italicised passages directly quoted from the hypotexts, readers can more easily notice reshuffled quotations and experience their jocular inappropriateness or absurdity. Differences in medium can thus increase or decrease the parodic effect.

⁵ The prefatory quote following the dedication is taken from Jung’s *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (343-344). Other references include the ‘Gustav Manuscript,’ which may have borrowed its given title from the psychologist’s middle name, and the allusions to *Self*, *secret*, *unconscious*, and *alchemy*, which are key concepts in Jungian psychology.

⁶ Romeo is indeed furtive in his nightly venture: He speaks in a low voice and uses the back door because “[his] father must not see [his] woman’s weeds” (MacDonald, 1998, p. 72). Old Montague can, from a Lacanian perspective, be seen as the no/name of the father barring access to the object of desire, the back entrance to Constance’s balcony.

⁷ Although incomplete, this episode of returned same-sex love contrasts with Desdemona’s rejection of the love declaration made by Romeo, dressed as Juliet (MacDonald, 1998, p.83), and her (rhetorical) question, “[d]oth no one in Verona sail straight?” (p. 85).

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