

“He Looks like He’s Stepped out of a Painting:” The Idealization and Appropriation of Italian Timelessness through the Experience of Romantic Love

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Published online: March 2020

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

Abstract: This paper investigates two popular historical novels, Marina Fiorato’s *The Glassblower of Murano* (2008) and Anne Fortier’s *Juliet* (2010), in order to shed light on a discourse of pure origins and unbroken continuity that concerns ‘Italy’ as a cultural construct. Within both narratives, ‘falling in love in Italy’ occasions the appropriation of a privileged relation with history and the past, a notion often contrasted with the displacement and rootlessness that seem to characterize the modern places, people and lifestyles of England and North America. This essay proposes an exploration of the notion of romantic love as one of the forces reconnecting displaced and fragmented Anglo-American souls with a supposedly timeless and unbroken society. From a point in time when the dialectics of history have been allegedly transcended, Anglophone popular narratives portray Italy as a space of timelessness and pre-modernity, where the experience of romantic love carries within it the promise of a new identity.

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Keywords: ‘Italy’ as cultural construct, Anne Fortier, Marina Fiorato, popular historical fiction, romantic love

This paper investigates two popular historical novels, Marina Fiorato's *The Glassblower of Murano* (2008) and Anne Fortier's *Juliet* (2010), in order to shed light on a discourse of pure origins and unbroken continuity that concerns 'Italy' as a cultural construct.[1] Within both narratives, 'falling in love in Italy' occasions the appropriation of a privileged relation with history and the past, a notion often contrasted with the displacement and rootlessness that seem to characterize the modern places, people and lifestyles of England and North America. This essay proposes an exploration of the notion of romantic love as one of the forces reconnecting displaced and fragmented Anglo-American souls with a supposedly timeless and unbroken society. From a point in time when the dialectics of history have been allegedly transcended, Anglophone popular narratives portray Italy as a space of timelessness and pre-modernity, where the experience of romantic love carries within it the promise of a new identity.

The popular historical narratives I have chosen to discuss present a combination of characteristics from different established literary genres. There are elements of the romance, and the adventure and the historical novels are blended together with established popular chick-lit themes and tropes. In particular, the double-strand narrative according to which both novels are structured allows for a fictional but realistically conceived 'historical' account set in the past: slow-paced, captivating, rich in historical particulars, set against a faster-paced, current storyline that sees the heroine negotiating her role within a present-day world still very informed by its historical past. In both cases, the heroine stumbles upon love without actively looking for it.[2]

My critical approach to the texts focuses on the literary construction of national otherness, and on the taxonomic distribution of human experience organized around geographic and cultural criteria. In particular, it aims at exploring the role Italy is given to play in both texts. Italy is construed and constructed, in both narratives, as a place in partial discontinuity with modernity, a place of unbroken traditions still very much defined by history which is not seen, however, as a process on-going in the present, but as a force still informing the present by giving it a quality of timelessness and immobility. Within this context, the "modern" heroines coming from Anglo-America move across centuries past and present and find autonomously their due and proper place within the fabric of Italian society. Romantic love with an Italian man, quite simply, secures their integration further.

The theoretical backbone of this essay is constituted by findings and insights coming from multiple and diverse disciplines: cultural studies, orientalist and postcolonial studies, tourism studies and the study of popular romance. Its focus remains on the making of Italy as a site where the heroine, English or American, recovering from a hurtful separation or in search of adventure, is conventionally allowed, by an established cultural and literary tradition of literary and popular antecedents, to momentarily 'drift': to deviate from her life routine and find romance, uncover family secrets, learn important and previously unknown facts concerning her past and personality.

A scholarly article that puts into sequence telling instances of this model from the middle of the last century and in the context of filmic texts is Carolyn Anderson's "Cold War Consumer Diplomacy and Movie Induced Roman Holidays" (2011). In her study, Anderson investigates how US government cultural policies and the American travel and movie industries concurred, throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, in creating consistent and successful discourses (built on previous existing notions) to encourage the practice of middle-class tourism to Western Europe and Italy in particular. Specifically, Anderson shows

how Rome was promoted to the American female audience on the basis of its “lure as the site of glamour, excitement, and sexual fulfilment...” (16). Whether depicted as the romantic setting of the innocent and momentary transgression of a young princess (*Roman Holiday*, 1953), or the dissolute background for a cautionary tale on the dangers of unrequited sexual longing at a mature age (*The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, 1961), Rome was presented to the American public as the site of desire, adventure and existential discoveries, positive as well as tragic. In other words, Hollywood films of the period created Rome as a space for female fantasies and self-fulfilment.[3]

The present study constitutes a further addition to the analysis of this discourse. It aims, in particular, at showing how, within these two contemporary narratives of popular historical fiction, current interpretations of enduring discourses that reiterate a global taxonomic organization of spaces according to their perceived degree of modernity, converge. Specifically, I will follow and analyse three particular discursive trajectories set within the narratives: (1) their shared otherization and orientalizing of Italy as an ‘original’ site, a space that lives in continuity with the past and for this reason does not completely belong to the contemporary world. Having been superseded by (post)modernity, it is the place where the (post)modern individual goes, if she pleases, in order to discover who she really is, and learn essential life lessons on her ancestral origins.[4] Secondly, I wish to bring to light the intersecting of this discourse with one isolated and analysed by scholars within the field of tourist studies, which construes and represents Italy as an “idealized land of leisure” (Hom 6), a space evoked by “stereotypes that situate it within a romanticized past and accordingly vague ideas of tradition and authenticity” (Hom 6). According to this perspective, Italy is a product to be consumed precisely by virtue of its alleged resistance and non-adherence to the rules of the globalized market. The two narratives I set out to discuss are, to my mind, successful literary interpretations of this outlook on Italy—one particularly suited to literary and tourist (discursive) practices at the time of late capitalism, as they present the journey of both heroines to Venice and Siena respectively, as “treasure-hunting” trips to historically themed amusement parks where a new identity can be attained along with romance, personal enjoyment and a lot of fun.

The third point I wish to make, indeed the most relevant in this context, is that the writing of romance is heavily influenced by the two previous sets of discourses, in the sense that (3) romance comes, in both narratives, as a supplement and an appendage: the cherry on the cake of an ‘Italian experience.’ Both Alessandros, the romantic heroes in the novels, are presented as handsome prototypes of classic Italian beauty, tall, dark and mildly ‘oriental.’[5] More to the point, as they are modern instantiations of eternal types, recognizable in frescoes and paintings from centuries past, they contribute to weaving the literary and discursive illusion of the everlasting fabric of Italian society and culture as the world (post)modern individuals will choose to occasionally visit and fall back on whenever they need to pause, reset or change direction; whenever, in other words, they need a break from the alienations and estrangements of the contemporary globalized world.

In her *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003), Pamela Regis surveys literary critics’ definitions of the core features of romance novels: if Janice Radway, for instance, sees in the “happy ending” and “a slowly but constantly developing love between hero and heroine” (67) the lowest common denominator shared by romance narratives, Deborah Kaye Chappel indicates in the “the central conflict [...] about the love relationship between the hero and heroine” (7-8) the basic structural mechanism of the genre. Each of the two

narratives under scrutiny in this essay, Marina Fiorato's *The Glassblower of Murano* and Anne Fortier's *Juliet*, presents a love storyline with such characteristics, as well as the more exact and recently analysed ones, which focus on narrative devices, isolated and discussed by Regis and Lisa Fletcher. For instance, in *The Glassblower of Murano* it is possible to distinctly detect all eight of the essential elements at the core of romance narratives discussed by Regis,[6] in addition to the performative utterance "I love you", the speech act which, according to Fletcher, constitutes the very essence of the romance novel.

In both texts under scrutiny, however, the love story is inscribed within the broader development of the heroines' quest for their lost origins. More specifically, in both texts, the romantic storyline is constructed according to the tropes illustrated and discussed in scholarly analyses, but it is, in both cases, a secondary development subordinated to the heroines' more central quest for existential belonging and integration. This is particularly true for *Juliet*: although the novel "puts the heroine at the centre of the book" (Regis 29), it favours her adventures, investigative conquests and individual development over the romantic plot. Reversing a trope that has held true for adventure fiction told from a male perspective, that of making of the heroine a "placeholder girl, a token female, because finding love is not the hero's principal objective" (Fletcher, "Writing" 8), the novel makes of the male Italian protagonist an accessory to the heroine.

The Glassblower of Murano

In *The Glassblower of Murano* (2008), Anglo-Italian author Marina Fiorato[7] tells the story of Leonora, a young woman who travels to Venice from London in search of her genealogical past and cultural roots after an unexpected and painful divorce. The novel combines the established narrative pattern of a woman who, in a contemporary time, abruptly finds herself in the condition of having to find a new purpose to life, with an historical tale. Leonora will find guidance and inspiration in the figure of her famous ancestor, Corradino Manin, a glassblower artist active in the seventeenth century and celebrated in Europe for his exceptional skills in working with glass. Although the character of Corradino Manin is entirely fictional, the historical context is not: Fiorato makes Corradino meet Louis XIV of France, she intertwines Corradino's story with the construction of the Palace of Versailles, and makes Corradino a member of the Manin family, a prominent historical Venetian clan.

Coming from London, Leonora incarnates a 'modern' outlook that she brings to the timeless life and culture of Venice. In her quest for a job and a life away from England, Leonora is guided by the need to anchor her fleeting existence to something solid and unchanging: continuing genealogical ties and a continuing line of work. Leonora's father is a recently deceased Venetian, but her most immediate and recent family relations do not interest her very much; she expects to find the key to her own identity in the distant past of Corradino's time. Eventually, Leonora will find her due place in the history of the city as a talented glassblower; she will discover herself to be the rightful heir to Corradino's skills, and she will find continuity by giving birth to a child whom she will name Corradino.[8]

Before Leonora, her mother Elinor had visited Venice, where she met and fell in love with Leonora's father, Bruno. Elinor detects, before Leonora does, a resemblance between

the features of modern-day Italians and the figures commonly portrayed in paintings. In particular, the first time she sees Bruno, Elinor observes:

He worked on the boat – opening and closing the gate, tying and untying the boat at each *fermata* stop. Bruno twisted the heavy ropes between his long fingers and leapt from the boat to shore and back again with a curious catlike grace and skill. She studied his face, his aquiline nose, his trim beard, his curling black hair, and tried to identify the painting he had come from. Was it a Titian or a Tiepolo? A Bellini? Which Bellini? As Elinor looked from his profile to the impossibly beautiful *palazzi* of the Canal Grande, she was suddenly on fire with enthusiasm for this culture where the houses and the people kept their genetic essence so pure for millennia that they looked the same now as in the Renaissance. This fire that she felt, this continuity and rightness, did not leave her when Bruno noticed her glances and asked for a drink. (Fiorato, *Glassblower* 15)

This passage combines a discourse based on a perceived genetic continuity with one of continuity in history.[9] It is a clear fantasy of pure origins that tells much of the way Italy is perceived in the global taxonomic configuration of cultures; a fascinating conceptualization of a certain sort of fantasizing on characteristics that extend from the urban landscape (the old houses) to the people, and vice-versa. The notion of an ‘essence’ or, as Fiorato terms it in the course of the story, a “(Venetian) genome,” preserved throughout the centuries, is widely fantasized upon in contemporary popular literature on Italy.

For this reason, Leonora often has the impression of meeting people whose physical features are the same as those depicted in classic Italian paintings. References to Italians looking like timeless prototypes of Southern European beauty are recurring throughout the novel. When Leonora meets Alessandro for the first time, the man she will fall in love with, she comments:

He sat across the aisle from her in the church. Probably thirty or so, well-groomed like most Italian men, tall as his legs tucked uncomfortably behind the pew. And his face – before she realized, the thought had formed in her head.

He looks like he has stepped from a painting. (Fiorato, *Glassblower* 40-41)[10]

To this comment, later in the novel, Alessandro answers: “It’s common here. You see the same features walking around that have been here for hundreds of years. The same faces”(Fiorato, *Glassblower* 114).

In *The Glassblower of Murano*, architecture and people are casually assimilated in the composition of a nostalgic image, an enduring *tableau* that consistently suggests the same characteristics. From this perspective, the painting/portrait becomes the perfect point of encounter between the enduring architecture (a supposedly unchanging presence) and the mutability of people, an object located between fixity and volatility to which the protagonists of the novel regularly return to find confirmation and assurance of their belonging to a continuous and benign history.

Moreover, in the text, portraits, but also glass – and, more specifically, mirrors (in the novel *Corradino Manin* is made to be the inventor of mirror-making), which are explicitly likened, by Fiorato, to looking glasses – become doorways to enter and exit the past. Through portraits, glasses and mirrors, Leonora enjoys the possibility to observe the past and to occasionally enter it, so as to be reminded of her place in history. At the same time, however, she also preserves her prerogative of moving freely and autonomously in the present.

Falling in love goes through the protagonists' acknowledgment of their resemblance with historical figures, so that finding *love* is essentially inscribed within the larger quest to find one's *belonging* within an established and enduring social milieu. For this reason, since Leonora's ultimate quest is finding her rightful place within the tissue of Italian society, perceived as everlasting and intact, from her position of displaced and fragmented modern individuality, it is consoling, for her, to know that she is after all nothing more than a modern instantiation of an enduring and recurring type and that her physical features, as well as her artistic skills, have been given to her by her ancestors. In the following passage, Leonora and her (soon to be ex) husband Stephen discover, on their honeymoon, Leonora's resemblance to Botticelli's *Primavera*:

They were both taken by the figure of Spring in her flowing white gown sprigged with flowers, smiling her slight, hermetic smile, beautiful and full of promise. With her burnished blonde ropes of hair and her half-green hooded eyes she bore a startling resemblance to [Leo]nora. Stephen had stood her by the painting and taken down her hair while she blushed and squirmed. She remembered the Italians calling '*bellissima*', while the Japanese took photographs. (Fiorato, *Glassblower* 11)

The myth of a continuing and privileged relation with the past permeates the novel: in Venice, family lineages continue unbroken for centuries, preserving in time, along with their "genetic essences," not only their surnames, but also the same first names – which crop up regularly – characters, rivalries, and, inscribed in their bloodlines, the same tendencies towards good or evil.

In *The Glassblower of Murano*, in spite of its clear vocation for a light and graceful sort of entertainment, we see at work, adapted to the Italian context, several discursive tropes that can be better understood in relation to the rhetorical categories isolated by David Spurr in his *The Rhetoric of Empire* (1993): the general *classification* of Italy as the other of modern Europe, the *naturalization* of certain characteristics that from the territory extend to the people and get inscribed in the genetic code of Italians, the *idealization* of Italy in its relation to the past – its history is here, ready to be accessed and read as from an open book – and the *appropriation* of this imagined world from a distant modernity that has lost authenticity and continuity along the way.

Leonora wanders the streets of Venice and sees in it something beautiful, picturesque and unchanging, a place she feels she belongs to but which she is also able to contemplate from a different position, and from a different time. As a Londoner, Leonora enjoys the advantage of being 'ahead in history.' As the counterpart of Venice, London is implicitly represented as a place that has cut its ties with the past, a city that, because of its alleged lack of historical traditions, is incapable of offering that 'existential steadiness' that somehow seems to 'naturally' belong to Italy.

When Leonora decides to look for work in Murano, this proves to be a difficult endeavour, but not for contingent reasons, related to the present-day Italian political and economic situation. In the novel, Italy is never contextualized in the present-day; it is an idealized piece of past set in the present. The Venetian glassblowing community, still made up entirely of male glassblowers, reveals itself to be as hostile, chauvinistic, closed, and distrustful of change as it used to be three centuries earlier. Archaic in character and caught up in time, the community of glassblowers is essentially a present-day re-enactment of the same seventeenth-century organization.

Leonora is initially hired by the glassblowing enterprise as a potential economic asset on the basis of her blood relation to her famous ancestor Corradino. In the course of the story, she will discover to possess a real talent for the craft (a genetic legacy, of course) and, after various vicissitudes, she will be accepted within the community, bringing a fresh and modern perspective to the current state of affairs. At one point in the novel, Eleonora accepts an offer to pose for an advertising campaign for the Murano glasswork. In the campaign:

Her role was to bring modernity to the Antique end of Adelino's [the owner of the glassblowing factory] business. In modern day dress she was placed in classic Venetian paintings which featured glasswork and mirrors. In the main image she was computer manipulated to match the colour and style of paint and brushwork. She was dressed in seventeenth century costume of golds and greens, her hair flowing in the golden ripples of the most desired courtesans, her ivory skin given the craquelure of ancient tempera. Once again, in the image in a mirror – antique Manin this time – she was reflected in her work clothes, holding the tools of her trade instead of a fan or flower. (Fiorato, *Glassblower* 159-60)

In this symbolic representation, Leonora's young, fresh and modern presence is contrasted with the ageless life of Venice. This scene perfectly epitomizes Leonora's role within the story of the novel and exemplifies the symbolic function of glasses and mirrors as doorways between the past and the present.

A widespread misconception, according to which Italy is qualitatively different from Northern Europe and America by virtue of its supposed pre-modern character, is at the basis of this kind of literary fantasy. In Fiorato's narrative, Italians deal with historical events of previous centuries as if they were urgent and pressing matters; as if, as Alessandro explains, they "happened only yesterday" (41). The novel's characters are involved in old feuds, still fighting their ancestors' fights; modern-day Italian characters often speak on behalf of their ancestors, and centuries-old news still make headlines in Italian local newspapers.

Below is an excerpt of an interview with author Marina Fiorato in which she reveals some of her intentions in writing the novel:

Venice is so unchanging; it's essentially the same place architecturally as it was in the seventeenth century. There are few places in the world about which one can say this, because most cities have changed to accommodate roads and sprawling suburbs. But because Venice as a "character" was the same then as now, I thought it would be really interesting to take a look at ideas of heritage and continuity of a particular Venetian family, with a peculiar creative genius.

I was interested in whether or not a skill like glassblowing is passed down in the same way that, say, facial characteristics are. Is glassblowing in the Venetian DNA? Are these skills built into the Venetian genome, and how much does the city itself create artists by a kind of osmosis which has nothing to do with the century they are in? These are the kind of questions which interested me. (Fiorato, "Conversation" 5)

Fiorato assumes that Venice and the Venetians have preserved an unchanging 'character' because Venice's architecture has not changed during the last centuries. The author clearly does not admit the possibility of a place constantly changing in spite of its old buildings, and extends the quality of timelessness from the architecture to the people. At this point, she consigns this perceived timelessness and continuity of Venetian architecture, character and genius to genetic causes, to a DNA that gets transmitted throughout the centuries. In order for this to happen, Venice has to be construed as a time capsule, a timeless world in isolation from the modern world. In other words, in the narrative, Venice is presented as a 'self-contained ecosystem' (and/or a historically themed tourist park) in which people share the same genetic essence as the houses in which they live. Leonora momentarily disrupts this continuity, only to get assimilated by it at the end of the story. The only difference is that, as a visitor coming from the (post)modern world, Leonora chooses to be integrated within it; Italians cannot but be unaware of living in a parallel state of existence in partial discontinuity with modernity and the globalized world.

Juliet

Another instance of a fictional narrative that presents several similar characteristics – the young (this time American) heroine who comes to the old world in search of her long-lost (and preferably noble) origins, the intertwining of two stories, one set in the past, one set in the present – is *Juliet*, written by Anne Fortier in 2010.[11] The novel tells the (quite intricate) story of a young girl who decides, following the death of her aunt, to go to Siena and solve the mystery that has always surrounded her real identity. Juliet discovers herself to be the descendant of no one other than Giulietta Tolomei, the noble woman who inspired the literary creation of the Shakespearean heroine. Once in Siena, she predictably falls in love with the descendant of the nobleman Romeo. The family feuds that held sway in the city during the Middle Ages are still rampant in present-day Siena, and Juliet, just like Leonora, will discover her destiny to be indissolubly linked to that of the city, its history, and its culture.

Italians are, on the one hand, clearly historically pre-determined, with their never-ending rivalries and written (Shakespearean) destinies. They are also incapable of interpreting their own past and clearly need someone coming from the new world to help them uncover and understand their history. In the course of the story, for instance, Juliet will be able to unearth, along with a dagger and Palio banner from 1340, nothing less than the tomb of Romeo and Giulietta, buried underneath Siena's Palazzo Pubblico, at the heart of the city. The tomb, forgotten there for centuries and unknown to Italians, is easily discovered by a young American girl within the time of a short holiday.

The novel's Siena is self-enclosed and mysterious, still anchored to a medieval past. Unlike in the real modern-day Siena, *contradas* still hold political and juridical power.[12] This magical city offers valuable teachings to Juliet, who will learn to treat the past as a force very much alive in the present. "Don't underestimate the power of events that happened a long time ago," an older American woman warns Juliet, "that is the tragic flaw of modern man. I advise you, as someone from the New World: listen more, and speak less. This is where your soul was born" (Fortier 30). The passage could hardly make more explicit the difference between the postulated modernity of Americans and the archaic character of Italy. Modern American men and women come to Italy from the new world to learn about the lost origin of their 'souls;' what they can learn from Italy pertains to a peculiar existential register, an unsubstantial and mystical one, not to the concrete and utilitarian modern world.

Siena is therefore often depicted as a city in isolation from the modern world, a self-contained place regulated by timeless laws that survives into the present:[13]

As I walked down Via della Sapienza the facades of ancient houses closed in on me on all sides, and I was soon trapped in a labyrinth of centuries past, following the patterns of an earlier way of life. Above me a ribbon of blue sky was crisscrossed by banners, their bold colors strangely vivid against the medieval brick, but apart from that – and the odd pair of jeans drying from a window – there was almost nothing that suggested this place belonged to the modern world. (Fortier 38)

The heroine's adventure consists in entering such universe and making sense of it; in return, she is 'made sense of' by it. At the very beginning of the novel, this wish is after all clearly expressed by the protagonist, who employs, once again, the metaphor of glass to evoke the possibility of the transparency and permeability of time: "Stepping silently into his embrace [Umberto's, the family friend who delivers to Juliet the sad news of her aunt's death], I wish I had the power to flip reality upside down like an hourglass, and that life was not a finite affair, but rather a perpetually recurring passage through a little hole in time" (Fortier 4).

In *Juliet*, the narrative set in the past recounts in detail the supposedly historical events that inspired a pre-Shakespearean version, from 1340, of the encounter between Romeo and Juliet. The double-strand narrative offers Fortier the opportunity to tell of the historical Juliet and her contemporary instantiation. By making her heroine live again and again, cyclically through time, the author frames her within a mythical dimension which is extended to the rest of the geographical and social context: Siena and its people.

In the novel, the people of present-day Siena habitually wear medieval dresses at parties, women address one another as 'monna,'[14] contemporary painters descend from famous artists of the past. Everyone in Siena seems to have a long, unbroken, and thoroughly traceable family history. Everyone knows exactly who their ancestors were and what they were doing at any given time. The real identity of all the contemporary characters we meet in the novel is preserved in the past and within the walls of the city. Moreover, people in the novel recognize each other by looking at the facial features of one another's ancestors as portrayed in frescoes. Newborn children, in the 1970s, receive their baptism in the public fountain of their own *contrada*. The novel depicts a contemporary Italy in which superstition is rampant and current members of the clergy, the descendants of (the Shakespearean) Fra' Lorenzo, perform wedding rituals, in private castles, in medieval fashion.

The novel presents the reader with a pastiche that stretches its boundaries enough to comprehend the Palio, historical families from Siena (the Tolomeis and the Salimbenis), Romeo and Juliet, the mafia, Charlemagne, a curse that has been in place for centuries but gets broken by Juliet in the course of a few weeks, the magical water of a fountain that makes one lose their mental faculties, a ring with evil powers, St. Catherine of Siena, acts of exorcism, and the bubonic plague. Clearly the novel does not aim at being a realistic depiction of life in modern-day Siena, but at the same time, the imagined character of this fantasy offers numerous clues on the self-perception of Americans (and northern Europeans) on Italian soil.

Moreover, its use of pastiche, a cultural device (literary as well as architectural) typical of postmodernism, transforms this narrative into the literary equivalent of the (fake) Italy we see rebuilt and represented abroad in luxury hotels and amusement parks. Describing the architectural pastiche of some 'Italian spaces' outside of Italy, such as, for instance, the Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans (a postmodern interpretation of an Italian piazza), or The Venetian Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, Hom argues that this fictitious spaces represent "a superlative expression of montage [of different Italian places and architectural styles across historical epochs] and simulation" (156). The same description applies to *Juliet*: the pastiche which, Hom argues, typically "replaces depth with surface" (171), is employed by Fortier as she performs a montage of stereotypes, tropes, and commonly shared notions of what an 'Italian adventure' should include. These are taken from different places and eras, making different spatial and temporal trajectories converge within a single narrative.

The American modern and rational heroine, in timeless Italy, has to come to terms with an 'other' dimension of existence, a mythical and primal one she partly desires, partly fears. In this perspective, when Juliet meets Alessandro (whose real name is, of course, Romeo), she meets romantic love, danger and existential otherness all in one person. Invoking an age-old tradition of cultural and literary discourses that equate Italy with a primitive, mysterious, and alluring dimension, Juliet describes her encounter with Alessandro/Romeo in the following terms: "What I saw in his eyes was as strange to me as a foreign coast after endless nights on the ocean; behind the jungle foliage I could sense the presence of an unknown beast, some primordial creature waiting for me to come ashore" (Fortier 304).[15]

In the novel, American lives are given a sense of history and purpose by the Italian way of life, that the author romanticizes – and this is the particularity of the narrative – not as a present-day instantiation of the Italian Middle Ages, or of the Renaissance period, but as a reproduction of a Shakespearean interpretation of Italy, to which the Italian characters wholeheartedly adhere, and which incarnates values opposite to those of Anglo-American modernity. It is not merely the fact that Italians demonstrate, at any given moment, a great familiarity with Shakespeare's works. More importantly, they recognize to them the inescapable power to shape their own characters and personalities in real life. In other words, they effortlessly perceive themselves as contemporary avatars of Shakespearean characters. The result is the creation of a fictional Italy, devoid of any sign of sheer plausibility, in which traditional stereotypes concerning Italian culture find a place in a larger pseudo-Shakespearean context.

The projection that the author makes is of a kind that proceeds from a perceived universal centre and expects its periphery not only to share in the same game of references, but to truly identify with its creations. It is certainly true that the status of the Shakespearean

canon has acquired a global value (Shakespeare is not a local cultural phenomenon), but the Shakespearean body of works is certainly not constitutive of all national literary and cultural histories in the same way. Throughout the novel, Italy (past and present) is made to emulate a Shakespearean interpretation of it, a fantasy constructed in romantic opposition to what the author perceives as modern-day American culture. I could maybe clarify my point by advancing the hypothesis of an Italian contemporary author writing contemporary stories set in Malaysia and depicting Malay people as perceiving themselves as variations of characters created by Emilio Salgari.[16] It could certainly be an entertaining idea, but there should be, I believe, some awareness of the artificial (and possibly controversial) nature of the operation. In Fortier's novel, on the other hand, there is no sign of irony, not the weakest reference to the author's awareness of the contrived (and ideologically charged) character of her literary expedients.

Perhaps it is worthwhile, at this point, to read Fiorato's considerations on Venice as an everlasting and self-identical space and Fortier's description of Siena as a "universe unto itself" (104) in light of the following passage:

This patina of tradition and authenticity dissociates destination Italy from the messiness of globalization. It structures the fantasy of an Italy that does not fully take part in, say, the growing inequality between rich and poor or the escalation of environmental catastrophes related to climate change – two direct consequences of globalization and its underpinning ideology, neoliberalism. In this fantasy, destination Italy remains a country of *piccole industrie* (small industries) and family-based capitalism in which the social relations between people trump the economies of scale. The natural landscape is all cypresses groves, vineyards, and olive trees unaffected by global warming. Urban areas stand free of cookie-cutter sprawl and slick architectural eyesores. (Hom 10)

The reader might recall Fiorato's description of the community of glassblowers in Murano as a *piccola industria*, a family business regulated by personal relations. Personal relations, in turn, are still strongly determined, in present-day Venice, by ancient history between families. Venice, in *The Glassblower of Murano*, is a world apart from globalization, a place outside of history that lives on ancient traditions. The same can be said of Fortier's Siena, a city where individual autonomy and self-determination are thoroughly inscribed within family histories and Shakespearean designs. Both narratives, therefore, promote and celebrate Italy as a literary simulacrum, as the experience of being a reader/tourist in this "vivid sensorium" (Hom 216) which constitutes a "brief reprieve from the anxieties associated with rapid and unchecked globalization" (Hom 218). Of course, Italy is globally commercialized as such (as a space outside globalization), and both narratives seem to reproduce this very same paradox as they depict, on the one hand, an 'authentic' world of past mores and traditions. On the other, this world is obviously for sale, as everything is available to our postmodern heroines: a new identity, a new family, a new life, and romance to top it all.

Concluding Remarks

In both *The Glassblower of Murano* and *Juliet*, a modern-day heroine goes to the south of Europe to find herself and start anew. In both novels, she ends up reconnecting to her past and finding a whole existential collocation that she did not have at the beginning of the story. Julie M. Dugger explains that one of the three main objections feminist criticism has traditionally made to romance novels is that “romance endorses women’s relational role at the expense of their individual development” (6). In the texts I have been discussing, the precise opposite occurs: social integration is an important goal for both Leonora and Juliet, and a love relationship, in both cases, is central to the achievement of such a goal, but both heroines make their romantic encounters fit within their larger and more pressing pursuits of individual development.

Italy has the role of providing displaced and fragmented Anglo-American souls with continuity and purpose. In return, Italians get just a little emancipated by the new world outlook, realizing their sometimes excessive clinging to the past. I have chosen these two works, in particular, because they present a double narrative, partly set in the past, partly in the present, making particularly true, in a popular key, Susan Peabody’s remark on historical novels, which “function structurally as a metaphor, joining the past with the present, and the reader with the author, emphasizing their mutual similarities and differences” (37). In both narratives, the Italian present (Italy’s present-day political, social, and cultural situation) is not at all acknowledged, and in *Juliet* Italian history is subsumed in the two historical phases of the Middle Ages, still in a way ongoing, and the Renaissance, just not the Italian one, but the Shakespearean one, that provides present-day Italian people with the opportunity to fulfil their predetermined destinies.

Lastly, the Italian cities at the centre of each narrative, Venice and Siena, are depicted as autonomous and self-contained microcosms. They challenge the protagonists at the same time as they provide them with a new identity and existential collocation within their everlasting social fabric. Both cities resemble historically themed amusement parks that blend danger with pleasure and adventure with sensory experience. By reiterating the creation of ‘Italy’ as a space capable of challenging – and eventually restoring – the symbolic order of the (Anglo-American) self, both narratives affirm themselves as successful literary interpretations of a broader approach to Italy which spatializes it, in popular literature as well as in architecture, as a “floating signifier of itself” (Hom 129), ready to be consumed by global postmodern tourists and readers alike.

[1] A previous draft of this paper has been presented at “Think Globally, Love Locally?”- The Seventh International Conference of Popular Romance Studies, Sydney 2018. I am sincerely grateful to the anonymous reviewers and editors of this journal for their observations on my work.

[2] For this particular aspect, the two narratives resemble others set in Italy, from diverse literary/filmic genres, where although love is not the main focus or the final goal of the heroine’s quest, it is “made to happen” anyway. It is, it could be argued, an unexpected ‘prize’ for the heroine’s autonomous and independent life choices. On this very topic, see the book chapter “Women, Travelling and Later Life” by Sarah Falco and Katsura Sako in *Ageing, Popular Culture and Contemporary Feminism*. Falco and Sako analyse five narratives which

place (aging) female heroines at the centre of a transformative travel experience. Three, out of the five filmic texts, are partially set in Italy or have Italy as their principal 'exotic location': *Eat Pray Love* (Murphy 2010); *Under the Tuscan Sun* (Wells 2003) and *Letters to Juliet* (Winick 2010). The two other films discussed by Falco and Sako propose locations which are characteristically 'oriental': India (*The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, Madden 2012) and the United Arab Emirates (*Sex and the City 2*, King 2010).

[3] The trope of sensual and sexual Italy can be traced back at least to the Grand Tour of the eighteenth century, a practice which consecrated Italy as a land of aesthetic beauty and sensual pleasures. Although these were mostly experienced by men, Hom explains they were not their exclusive prerogative: "Many Grand Tourists hired prostitutes, others officially took on mistresses, and still others acted repressed homosexual desires. Female Grand Tourists, who were quite rare, tended to engage in cicisbeship, or the arrangement in which a married woman had a male companion who acted as her social escort (and sometimes lover)" (87).

[4] From this perspective, my use of 'orientalism' to denote the general process of otherizing Italy should be understood in light of the fact that I make use of the scholarly tradition of postcolonial studies which has emerged in the wake of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) to analyse literary discourses that specifically concern themselves with Italy as a cultural construct.

[5] On the overlapping of the Arab hero with the Latin lover in the Anglo-American imaginary, as well as in literary and filmic texts see, for instance, Hsu-Ming Teo's detailed article on E.M. Hull's *The Sheik* and its filmic transposition: "Historicizing *The Sheik*: Comparisons of the British Novel and the American Film."

[6] "In one or more scenes, romance novels always depict the following: the initial state of society in which heroine and hero must court, the meeting between heroine and hero, the barrier to the union of heroine and hero, the attraction between the heroine and hero, the declaration of love between heroine and hero, the point of ritual death, the recognition by heroine and hero of the means to overcome the barrier, and the betrothal. These elements are essential" (Regis 30).

[7] Marina Fiorato is half-Venetian. She was born in Manchester and raised in the Yorkshire Dales. She is a history graduate of Oxford University and the University of Venice, where she specialized in the study of Shakespeare's plays as an historical source. After university she studied art and worked as an illustrator, actress and film reviewer. Among her published works, there are numerous historical tales set in Italy, such as *The Madonna of Almonds* (2006), *The Botticelli Secret* (2010), *Daughter of Siena* (2011), and *The Venetian Contract* (2012).

[8] "With an open heart she loved Venice again and the city loved her back. She belonged. She had done something as fundamental as giving birth here. She had given *La Serenissima* another son" (Fiorato, *Glassblower* 343).

[9] There are numerous instances, in the text, in which this continuity is remarked upon. When Elinor discovers to be pregnant, she observes: "Here inside her, thought Elinor, was that fire, that continuity, that eternal flame of the Venetian genome. But the feeling faded as the modern world broke into theirs" (Fiorato, *Glassblower* 16). The perceived continuity of the 'Venetian genome,' therefore, is clearly contrasted with the disruptive force of modernity. Houses and people blend in the same picturesque and timeless tableau set up for Leonora's gaze: "[Leo]nora wandered the bridges, as enchanted by a string of washing

hanging from window to window across a narrow canal, or by a handful of scruffy boys kicking a football in a deserted square, as she was by the delicate Moorish traceries of the fenestrations" (Fiorato, *Glassblower* 32).

[10] Later, Leonora will find out exactly the painting Alessandro seems to have stepped from: "When she went to the fridge for milk she saw it. A postcard stuck under her fridge magnet. She recognized the style of Titian; a picture of a cardinal flanked by two young men. The man on the right, also in priest's robes, was the image of Alessandro. Leonora read the back; Tiziano Vecelli, portrait of Pope Clement X with his nephews, Niccolo' and – surely not! – Alessandro, 1546" (Fiorato, *Glassblower* 156-57).

[11] Anne Fortier was born in Denmark and holds a Ph.D. in the History of Ideas from Aarhus University. She has lived in Canada and the U.S. Her novel *Juliet* enjoyed great commercial success, having been published in over thirty countries. A movie, adapted from *Juliet*, is currently being produced. Fortier's latest novel is *The Lost Sisterhood*, 2014.

[12] A *contrada* is a district, a ward. Siena retains a ward-centric structure from medieval times. The city is divided into contradas, each represented by a mascot, usually an animal. Originally instituted as battalions in defence of the city, current contradas do not hold any form of administrative or juridical power. Contradas compete against each other every year at the Palio.

[13] In the following passage, for instance, Siena is explicitly described as a self-contained space in continuous dialogue with its past: "Palazzo Pubblico had, like all seats of government, grown with age. From its origins as little more than a meeting room for nine administrators, it was now a formidable structure, and I entered the inner courtyard with a feeling of being watched. Not so much by people, I suppose, as by the lingering shadows of generations past, generations devoted to the life of this city, this small plot of land as cities go, this universe unto itself" (Fortier 104).

[14] 'Monna,' in archaic Italian, was a formal way of addressing married women. It comes from the contraction of the word 'Madonna.'

[15] An important work that investigates the field of British representations of Italian culture, giving primitivism its due attention, is Annemarie McAllister's *John Bull's Italian Snakes and Ladders: English Attitudes to Italy in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (2007). The study demonstrates how a certain imagined and composite notion of 'Italian-ness' has contributed to the formation of British modern identities. By showing how this notion has entered British cultural and literary traditions taking the form of a reservoir for all that was deemed discordant to the making of the British individual, collective, and national identities, McAllister illustrates how self-representations and narratives of national consolidation took place not only in opposition to the Orient, but to others within Europe as well. McAllister's work examines the last segment of the nineteenth century, and the period of the *Risorgimento* in particular, making evident the construction of a European 'other' represented by those geographical areas that were not moving as rapidly as Britain towards technological advancement and industrial development. Another important investigation that explores representations of Italy and Italians, this time in British cinema, is Elisabetta Girelli's *Beauty and the Beast* (2009), which sets itself the goal to demonstrate that "typecast, specific notions of Italianness have deep roots in British society, and are related to equally fixed ideas of Britishness" (10). See also my article on the representation of Italian culture in popular Anglophone texts (Pierini 2016).

[16] Emilio Salgari (1862-1911) was an Italian author of adventure books. He wrote extensively and his books have been extremely popular, not only in Italy, but also in Spain, Portugal, and South America. Many of his most popular novels have been transformed into comic books, children books, films, and animated films.

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