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# PROTEAN POETICS IN SHAKESPEARE AND JOYCE

by

KATHRIN BETHKE

Proteus, the protagonist of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, is the only character in William Shakespeare's *oeuvre* based directly on an episode from Homer's *Odyssey*. Shakespeare scholars usually emphasize the mutability and inconstancy of the character, thus explaining why he was given the name of the ancient shape shifter. However, in Shakespeare's time, Proteus is also eponymous with a particular element of Renaissance poetics, namely the Proteus verse introduced by Iulius Caesar Scaliger in his *Poetices Libri Septem* of 1561 (588). The elements of a Proteus verse can be deliberately permuted without compromising the line's semantic or metrical integrity. It thus represents the nucleus of a combinatorial poetics that Shakespeare's comedy alludes to directly in its opening scene: after the character of Julia tears into pieces a love letter from her lover Proteus, she instantly starts to permute and recombine its elements, thus creating a linguistic space for the couple to be 're-combined' and thus reunited (1.2.100–30). In a reading focused on the poetological implications of the scene of the torn letter this study aims to demonstrate that the protean poetics of permutation and recombination govern the development of plot and characters as well as the language and semiotics of love in Shakespeare's early play. A similar argument can be made for the Proteus episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The third chapter of Joyce's novel features various scenes of reading and writing that echo the metapoetic scene of the torn letter from Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and can be read as equally programmatic for the poetic form of the fifteen subsequent episodes. The myth of Proteus as well as the poetic paradigm embodied by Scaliger's Proteus line can thus be employed as poetological heuristics in a comparative reading of Shakespeare's early comedy and Joyce's *Proteus* episode that ultimately points to a historical trajectory connecting early modern and modernist poetics.

## The Myth of Proteus and Combinatorial Poetics

In book four of Homer's *Odyssey*, at the end of what is usually called the 'Telemachiad', Odysseus' son Telemachus joins Helen and Menelaus for a banquet to inquire after his missing father. Menelaus reports that he has already made inquiries of his own: stranded on the isle of Pharos, hidden in the foul-smelling skin of a seal, he has been able to tackle the ancient sea-god Proteus and asked him about the way home. Proteus is known for resisting such interrogations by transforming himself into all kinds of shapes and elements, which is why Menelaus and his friends must hold him down until he changes back into his original form:

And then the old forger all his forms began  
 First was a lion with a mighty mane,  
 The next a dragon, a pied panther then,  
 A vast boar next, and suddenly did strain  
 All into water. Last he was a tree,  
 Curl'd all at top, and shot up to the sky. (4.609–14)<sup>1</sup>

Renaissance texts frequently invoke the obstinate sea god as an advocate of mystic knowledge and scientific inquiry (Giamatti 437–42), as an allegory of the “primal matter” (443), or as a prototype of the actor or the poet himself, either with its positive connotation of the *poeta vates* who has insight into various creatures and elements, or the shadow side of that role as the great seducer and manipulator (445–72). Bartlett Giamatti has consequently argued that “there is no more inclusive vision of the versions of Proteus in the Renaissance” than Shakespeare’s Proteus (475). His character, however, has an additional connotation hitherto unexplored by the existing research on the play. It unfolds in the second scene of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* when a young woman named Julia receives a letter from her suitor Proteus, delivered by her maid Lucetta. In a fit of girlish coyness and feigned indifference, Julia refuses to accept the letter and – as a proof of her resolution – tears it into pieces. A minute later she regrets her rashness and kneels down to reassemble the countless little love letters in front of her. When she finds the characters of her own name and those of Proteus among the scraps she happily “fold[s]” the scraps “upon another” (1.2.129) in such a way that she and her lover can be – quite literally – reunited:

Lo’, here in one line is his name twice writ:  
 ‘Poor forlorn Proteus’, ‘passionate Proteus’,  
 ‘To the sweet Julia’ – that I’ll tear away.  
 And yet I will not, ’sith so prettily  
 He couples it to his complaining names,  
 Thus will I fold them, one upon another.  
 Now kiss, embrace, contend, do what you will. (1.2.125–30)

Julia’s coy refusal of a love letter is a novella convention that Shakespeare adapts from a mid-sixteenth century Spanish prose romance by Jorge de Montemayor entitled *Diana Enamorado* (cf. Bullough 231). What makes the passage original and exciting in this context is the newly added element of the tearing of the letter and the fact that it was written by a man named Proteus. The scene thus becomes legible as a metapoetic allegory of the so-called Proteus line as Iulius Caesar Scaliger describes it in his *Seven Books of Poetry* in a chapter devoted to verse variations defined by word order (585–91). Following a section on palindromic verses that can be read backwards, Scaliger mentions a line whose words can change places so many times that the verse will assume “innumeras paene facies”, or ‘countless new faces’ (588). It thus achieves on the level

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<sup>1</sup> George Chapman’s partial translation of the *Odyssey* was first printed in 1615, so it must be assumed that in the early 1590s, when Shakespeare presumably started writing *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, no English translation of the epic was available to him. Scholars such as Bartlett Giamatti (1968), Brenda Thaon (1985), and William E. Burns (2001), however, have documented the pervasive presence of the Proteus myth in Renaissance philosophy and literature.

of verse what anagrams do on the level of the single word. Scaliger's sample line reads: "Perfide sperasti divos te fallere Proteu" – 'Wickedly you hoped to deceive the Gods, Proteus' (588). It offers not only a description, but a performance of protean shape shifting. Mathematically, the six elements of Scaliger's Proteus line can be permuted in  $6! = 720$  different ways. If metre and semantics are taken into consideration, the possibilities are significantly reduced, but still copious: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who drew inspiration from Scaliger in his *Dissertation on Combinatorial Art*, identifies 64 metrically correct permutations of the line (245).

The Proteus line constitutes the nucleus of a combinatorial poetics that became quite fashionable in German baroque poetry and philosophy alike. Poets such as Georg Philipp Harsdörffer or Quirinius Kuhlman have composed entire Proteus poems consisting mainly of monosyllabic words that can be rearranged freely.<sup>2</sup> But Harsdörffer has also invented various ways of automating the combinatorial principle of the anagram and the Proteus line. Some of these devices are as simple as letter dices ("Delitiae" 513) or cylindrical combination locks, so-called "Mahl-Schlösser", that are inscribed with letters and numbers (cf. Zeller 169–73). Others are as elaborate as his "Fünffacher Denckring der Teutschen Sprache" (1636), or 'fivefold thinking of the German language', which consists of five movable concentric circles that are inscribed with suffixes, prefixes and other morphemes and letters ("Delitiae" 517). The rotation of one or more of these circles allows for the creation of new words and expressions. Harsdörffer's 'thinking' thus mechanizes the combinatorial nature of language as such. It combines *ars combinatoria* and *ars inveniendi* in an effort to fully exhaust the possibilities of the German language.

However, the integration of the mathematical art of combination into philosophical and literary discourses goes back much further. Both Leibniz and Harsdörffer base their work on the kabbalist idea of divine creation by way of words and letters, as well as on the reception of the Kabbalah by medieval and early modern Christian philosophers such as the Majorcan convert Ramón Llull (1231–1315) and, most importantly, the Italian polymath Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494). In his *Ars Magna*, Ramón Llull assigned nine letters from B to K to five sets of theological principles, including virtues and vices as well as the primary principles of *bonitas*, *magnitudo*, *aeternitas*, *potestas*, *sapientia*, *voluntas*, *virtus*, *veritas*, and *gloria*. Nine relational principles, e.g., *differentia*, *concordantia*, *contrarietas*, were established to regulate the way in which concepts and letters could be combined.<sup>3</sup> Llull then set out to use the theological arguments created by this early version of a computational algorithm (cf. Cramer "Statements" 53) in the conversion of nonbelievers to the Christian faith. Ramón Llull's

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<sup>2</sup> In a treatise on poetry and poetics, his *Poetischer Trichter* of 1648/53, Harsdörffer notes a Proteus poem composed entirely of monosyllabic nouns called "Wechselsatz", which means as much as 'interchangeable set' (51). While Harsdörffer's "Wechselsatz" consists of only 22 words, Quirinus Kuhlman's monstrous "Libes-Kuß 41" would generate over six billion permutations. The poem is reprinted in Rosemarie Zeller's book on the poetics of play in German baroque literature (175–76), whose chapter on "Ars combinatoria" gives an overview of the role of combinatorics in early modern poetry and poetics (157–87, see also Neubauer 11–39).

<sup>3</sup> An overview and analysis of Llull's *Ars brevis* can be found in (Yates 11–18, Neubauer 19–40, Eco 53–62, and Cramer 49–55).

*Ars* is an early example of a shift from a *combinatoria verborum* to a *combinatoria rerum* that not only permutes words and letters in an effort to create novel poetic expressions, but that applies combinatorics to the organization of concepts and ideas in a way that anticipates Leibniz's project of a *lingua characteristica* as part of a *mathesis universalis*.<sup>4</sup>

While Llull and Leibniz use combinatorics in an epistemological function as a generator of philosophical truths, authors of Proteus poetry utilise it as a means of poetic invention and creation. At the same time, they add an element of automation and mechanization to the process of writing and thus invoke the phantasm of poetic composition without a subject, an idea that has also been employed by avantgarde writers such as Tristan Tzara, who created poetry from random newspaper cutups (cf. Cramer 173–75), or writers of the *ouliipo*-group, most famously perhaps Raymond Queneau, who created a combinatorial sonnet sequence. The pages of that sequence are cut up between the lines of each sonnet, thus allowing for the permutation of lines and ultimately for the creation of *Cent mille milliard de poèmes* (Queneau). The innocent scene of the torn letter in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* thus anticipates the combinatorial poetics of Baroque and modernist literature and must be considered part of a historical trajectory that culminates quite famously in a novel composed entirely of anagrams, palindromes, and portmanteaus, namely James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. As a case in point: the novel contains nearly ten anagrammatic variations of Shakespeare's name, which are created either by the exchange of singular letters or by switching out entire lexemes. He is called "Shikespower" (47), "Chickspeer" (145), "shaggspick" (177), "Shakehisbeard" (177), "Sheekspair" (191), "Shakefork" (274), the "Great Shapesphere" (295), or "Shopkeeper" (539). Joyce's portmanteaus are a hybrid of anagrams, which rely on the permutation and recombination of letters, and homophonic puns, which are based on phonological similarities. As will be shown below, these anagrammatic structures are introduced and reflected in a number of metapoetic scenes in the *Proteus* episode of *Ulysses*, which thus constitutes a key text in the development of Joyce's late protean style.

Shakespeare's anagrammatism has been investigated by scholars such as Christopher Ricks, R.H. Winnick, and Helen Vendler, especially with regard to the *Sonnets*. While Ricks and Winnick concentrate first and foremost on anagrammatic variations of proper names distributed across the text, Vendler recognises the combinatorial texture of the *Sonnets* (217) and thus confirms for Shakespeare what Erika Greber has claimed in a systematic and foundational argument for the entire sonnet tradition (60–70).<sup>5</sup> But even though the scene of the Protean letter has received some critical attention, its reference to the Proteus line or the metapoetic dimension of Julia's permutation of names and

<sup>4</sup> Jan C. Westerhoff has traced the connections between Harsdörffer's combinatorial poetics and Leibniz's philosophical project to create a linguistic code that "was supposed to act as a system of notation for 'the alphabet of human thought'" (450).

<sup>5</sup> Erika Greber has shown that the sonnet, thanks to its numerological structure, anagrammatic word play, and permutation of rhymes, is an inherently combinatorial form (63). Helen Vendler has argued that the repetition and variation of themes, motifs, and even phrases in Shakespeare's sonnet sequence may inspire readers to create "false combinatory octaves or sestets", suggesting that the combinatory structure of the sonnet form may well be projected onto the sequence (217).

letters has never been investigated. Alan Stewart, for instance, simply dismisses the tearing of the letter as a “cute conceit” (64), while Frederick Kiefer focuses solely on the dramaturgical function of the scene as an “engaging” and “comically surprising” incident (68). In the following I want to show that the scene of the torn letter can be read at once as the poetological matrix of the play and as a metapoetic incident that submits to critical scrutiny the specific codes and conventions of love as it would become typical of Shakespearean comedy in the 1590s.

### **Combinatorial Languages of Love in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona***

Combinatorial poetry relies on a set of medial, performative, semiotic, and poetic rules and conditions. Combinatorial forms such as the anagram, the proteus line, and other examples discussed above, depend, just like calculus, on the notational iconicity of writing.<sup>6</sup> The materiality of the written (or printed) signifier is the medial condition for their permutation, which is usually achieved by some sort of manual intervention, adding a performative element to combinatorial practices like rearranging a Proteus line or creating one variation of Raymond Queneau’s *Cent mille milliards de poemes*. The variations of an anagram or a Proteus poem need to be written down in order to be actualised, and Harsdörffer’s ‘think-ring’ and Queneau’s sonnet sequence are meant to be touched and manipulated in order to produce a new combination.<sup>7</sup> The permutation of signifiers coincides with an element of mechanisation and automation, which, in turn facilitates rhetorical invention and finally results in an instance of autopoetic creation that scandalously dispenses of a unifying subject. The act of permutation temporarily disrupts the sequential order of a set of signifiers, which is then reassembled in a new fashion.

All of these aspects are present in the scene of the torn letter that initiates a multimodal combinatorics of love in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. When the character of Julia kneels down to rearrange the words and letters of her lover, the movement of her hands introduces a ludic element of play and contingency that is traditionally associated with combinatorial practices of writing and text making.<sup>8</sup> The tearing and

<sup>6</sup> In her research on the notational iconicity (“Schriftbildlichkeit”) of writing, Sybille Krämer has argued against the concept of writing as a mere phonographic representation of language that writing must be understood as a medium, a system of iconic symbols, and above all as a “cultural technology” (523) whose performative aspect is realized most poignantly in calculus, which depends on the operational use of written symbols: “Calculus is the incarnation of operative writing” (522).

<sup>7</sup> Examples like Harsdörffer’s various letter machines and Queneau’s cut up book suggest an analogue moment of haptic intervention or even manual labor in the actualisation of combinatorial variation: Harsdörffer reports that the 22 words of his “Wechselsatz” – poem might be permuted in so many ways that a scribe would have to write 1200 lines every day for 91 years to put them all on paper (“Trichter” 51–52). However, Florian Cramer has explored the connection of combinatory poetry to the algorithmic language of computers (“Statements”) and has created a website that permits the digital permutation of Queneau’s sonnet sequence and other texts mentioned above (cf. “permutations”).

<sup>8</sup> Susanne Strätling has pointed out the role of the hand in practices of writing and practices of play as both overlap in the various technologies used in the combinatorial arts: “The manipulating hand plays a prominent role not only in writing but also in playing, especially if the ludic activity arises from or



rearranging of the letter subvert the syntagmatic order of the original text in an instance of spatialisation that allows for the emergence of new meanings from a set of given signifiers. Her permutation and recombination of Proteus' words thus challenges the idea of authorial intention and generates new semantic possibilities from the pure language material her suitor has offered her. These semantic possibilities, as we recall, include a happy (re-) union accomplished by proxy through the confederation of two scraps of paper: "Now kiss, embrace, contend, do what you will" (1.2.130). Without even reading her admirer's protestations of love, she appropriates his words to textually realise her own vision of their story. As Julia combines her and Proteus' written characters, her actions assume the form of a magical ritual in which she whimsically animates her own and Proteus' name in such a way that the written signifiers can engage in sexual activity in lieu of the lovers themselves.<sup>9</sup> The animation of the text is achieved not only through the permutation of words but by addressing the letters as though they were living things, or words "made flesh" (1 John 1:14). The scene thus invokes both biblical and cabalist ideas of divine creation via words and letters (cf. Cramer "Statements" 23, 43–49; Westerhoff 454).<sup>10</sup>

The Protean scraps of papers tumbling to the floor of Shakespeare's comedy also recall a passage from Virgil's *Aeneid*, namely the myth of the Cumaen Sibyl, whose prophesies are written on oak leaves and plastered against the "honeycombed" (6.66) mouths of the oracle's cave until the wind scatters them about, thus permuting and recombining a myriad of human fates and future life stories (6.105–19). Just as Aeneas warns the Apollonian oracle to "commit no verses to the leaves" lest they "be confused, shuffled and whirled" by "playing winds" (6.117–19), Julia implores the powers of nature: "Be calm, good wind, blow not a word away/ Till I have found each letter in the letter" (1.1.119–20). The reference draws attention to the element of hazard and contingency in combinatorial operations: whatever text Julia's permutation of the letter may generate, she is merely its 'arranger', not its author. In the following I would like to explore further how the paradigm of combinatorics is realised throughout Shakespeare's early text.

First of all, the mechanism of permutation and recombination governs the realm of amorous attachments in the play. Shortly after Proteus has proclaimed to be "metamorphosed" (1.1.66) by his love for Julia, his love undergoes a metamorphosis of its own. He follows his good friend Valentine to Milan where he immediately falls in love with Valentine's valentine Silvia:

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leads into writing. [...] Harking back to mystical letter combinatorics, it experiences a heyday in the baroque *ars combinatoria* and does not end with the invention of Scrabble" (63).

<sup>9</sup> Julia's animation of written letters draws attention to the double meaning of the word "character", which denotes both dramatic figures in a play and letters on a page. The connection has been emphasized by Stephen Orgel, who claims that: "Characters [...] are not people, they are elements of a linguistic structure, lines in a drama, and more basically, words on a page" (102).

<sup>10</sup> Julia also apologizes to Proteus' "poor wounded name" (1.2.115) as she announces that she will "kiss each several paper for amends" (1.1.110) while "trampling contemptuously" (1.1.113) on her own name. Proper names thus exceed their function as arbitrary signifiers or synecdochic representations of persons in this context and assume an embodied presence reminiscent of the eucharist as it is prefigured in the gospel of John.

She is fair, and so is Julia that I love –  
 That I did love, for now my love is thawed.  
 Which like a waxen image 'gainst a fire  
 Bears no impression of the thing it was. (2.4.185–95)

Throughout the play, the feeling of love is described as a mutable form that constantly changes its shape and state of matter. Proteus describes it as a mouldable piece of wax that adjusts itself to the object of the amorous attachment but melts away just as quickly. Proteus's change of heart is accompanied by a significant change of character that allows him to abandon Julia and to betray his friend:

Julia I lose, and Valentine I lose.  
 If I keep them I needs must lose myself.  
 If I lose them, thus find I by their loss  
 For Valentine myself, for Julia, Sylvia. (2.6.19–22)

In these tautological ruminations, in which Proteus recklessly replaces every person dear to him with himself, people become mere place holders in a reckoning game of having and not having. While Julia's demiurgic language play turns letters into living characters, Proteus reduces human beings to interchangeable elements in a game of love in which amorous attachments can be permuted and re-combined just as swiftly as his love letters. The passage has an echo in Shakespeare's sonnet sequence, which also features a polyamorous constellation of lovers, namely the speaker, the beautiful youth and the so-called dark lady. Sonnet 42 highlights the combinatorics of love by playing through the possible permutations of this triad:

If I lose thee, my loss is my love's gain,  
 And losing her, my friend hath found that loss;  
 Both find each other, and I lose both twain,  
 And both for my sake lay on me this cross:  
 But here's the joy, my friend and I are one;  
 Sweet flattery! Then she loves but me alone. (42.9–14)

As the speaker faces the possibility of losing both objects of his affection to a couple formed amongst the two of them, he imagines an ideal unity between himself and the beautiful youth which can then be loved by the third party, thus creating a harmonious triad of love. Both these passages seem extremely similar in the way they play on the different flexions of love and loss, but their grammar and rhetoric are in fact quite different. Where Proteus constructs a convenient and simplistic syllogism out of parallelisms and antitheses that allow him to take the place of his best friend while abandoning his beloved, the sonnet employs the syntactical figures of chiasmus and antimetabole to perform the permutation of lovers and to play through the advantages of each constellation. Chiasmus and antimetabole, a figure that George Puttenham calls "the counterchange" in his *Arte of English Poesy* (217), are grammatical equivalents of the proteus line as they describe the distribution and syntactical position of a word across a verse or sentence.

To Julia, it is completely incomprehensible what might have affected the painful change of heart in her beloved. She follows Proteus to Milan in the disguise of a page and gets hold of a picture of her rival Sylvia. She quickly perceives that the only thing

distinguishing Proteus' new love from herself is the colour of her hair. The anagrammatics of love are thus complemented by an anagrammatics of beauty features:

Here is her picture. Let me see, [...]  
 Her hair is auburn, mine is perfect yellow.  
 If that be all the difference in his love,  
 I'll get me such a coloured periwig. (4.4.176–83)

This passage has a famous relative in John Donne's poem *The Anagram*, which was written about the same time as the play. The poem satirises the Petrarchan tradition of the blazon by creating a protean remix of body parts and facial features:

Marry, and love thy Flavia, for she  
 Hath all things whereby others beautiful be.  
 For, though her eyes be small, her mouth is great,  
 Though they be ivory, yet her teeth be jet:  
 Though they be dim, yet she is light enough,  
 And though her harsh hair fall, her skin is rough;  
 What though her cheeks be yellow, her hair's red;  
 Give her thine, and she hath a maidenhead. [...]  
 Though all her parts be not in th' usual place,  
 She hath yet an anagram of a good face. (10.1–16)

What these passages show is that the protean poetics of the torn letter are present in various elements of the play: aside from a fickle and inherently protean protagonist, the play is organised by a permutation of lovers, a permutation of beauty features, and a permutation of signifiers when it comes to the language of love. The scene also has theoretical implications regarding the language and semiotics of love, specifically in the comedies. It suggests that amorous passion can reside exclusively in the realm of language and letters. But it also implies that the signs and tokens of passion can be deliberately rearranged and redistributed, thus rendering the code of love as arbitrary, mutable, and conventional as language itself. The scene thus anticipates Niklas Luhmann's claim that love "as a medium is not in itself a feeling, but rather a code of communication" (20), a set of rules and communication standards that organises and generates emotions rather than originating in them. "In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, desire is textual", Jonathan Goldberg has argued accordingly (19).

When it comes to the relationship between language and affect, Shakespeare's comedies are very different from the tragedies, where emotions are often represented as something that is inaccessible to language and signification: Lear's daughter Cordelia famously refuses her father's request for verbal proof of her filial affection: "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth" (1.1.89–90), she says, and adds: "My love's more ponderous than my tongue" (1.1.75). Hamlet similarly claims that he has "that within that passeth show" (1.2.85). In contrast, love in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and subsequent Shakespearean comedies is defined by combinatorial language play whose mechanism also organises the play's character constellation and, ultimately, the dramaturgical resolution of the romantic plot. Only at the very end of the comedy, after the play has moved through all possible permutations, the original order of lovers is restored and Proteus finds forgiveness for his transgressions. He realises that,

whatever he might see in “Silvia’s face”, he “may spy, / more fresh in Julia’s with a constant eye” (5.4.112–13), thus attributing his unfaithfulness to the protean nature of visual perception.

By exploring the poetics of love from the perspective of the Proteus myth and the paradigm of the Proteus line, this early comedy establishes a variety of poetic principles that re-occur in Shakespeare’s later comedies and the sonnets. Julia reflects on the arbitrariness of amorous attachments, which constantly change position throughout the play. The motif of the permutation of lovers and the comical dramatizations of the de- and reattachment of affection reappear in plays like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595) or *As You Like It* (1599). The permutation of beauty features is connected to Shakespeare’s satirical reception of the Petrarchan sonnet tradition in *Sonnet 130* (1609) and in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (1595), a play about several hobby sonneteers who attempt to woo their paramours by writing conventional love poems but are mercilessly rejected as the female characters call out the conventionality and insincerity of the code of love represented by Petrarchism and the poetics of the blazon

PRINCES OF FRANCE: We have received your letters full of love,  
Your favours the ambassadors of love,  
And in our maiden council rated them  
At courtship, pleasant jest, and courtesy,  
As bombast and as lining to the time. [...]  
Dumaine: Our letters, madam, showed much more than jest. [...]  
Rosaline: We did not quote them so. (5.2.759–68)

*Love’s Labour’s Lost* remains Shakespeare’s only comedy without a happy end; the fourfold wedding that the audience would structurally expect from a comedy, is postponed for a year’s time.

The rejection of Petrarchan love letters in the later comedy echoes another scene featuring a torn letter in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. After Julia has joined Proteus’ service in the disguise of a page, she delivers a note from him to her unwitting competitor Sylvia, who instantly tears the letter into pieces because she distrusts the literary conventions of love. While Proteus advocates for the deceitful and seductive use of “wailful sonnets” (3.2.69) in the game of love, Sylvia is certain that his letter will be “full of new-found oaths, which he will break/ As easily as I do tear this paper” (4.4.122–24). Both the mythical figure of Proteus and the eponymous Shakespearean character stand for a semiotic insecurity in which the outside never matches the inside: just like the ancient sea god, Proteus assumes a myriad of different shapes as he disguises and disassembles his intentions (Giamatti 473). That semiotic unreliability is projected onto the realm of language. The Protean letters and their repeated dis-assembly by the female characters of the play paradigmatically establish the combinatorial mode as a poetic principle for the language of love in the comedies. But each time they also initiate a critical reflection of the particular code of love dramatized in the genre.

### **Protean Shapeshifting and Anagrammatism in *Ulysses***

In the *Proteus* episode of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, references to the myth of Proteus are much less direct than in Shakespeare’s comedy. Instead, the changeable features of the

ancient sea god are realised on the level of narrative perspective and poetic style.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the episode is an inherently poetological one. The thoughts and memories of its protagonist, an aspiring writer in his own right, are preoccupied by the themes of sense perception and poetic creation. Eventually, they culminate in a subversive scene of writing in which Stephen Dedalus tears apart a letter he was given by old Mr. Deasy in the *Nestor* episode and uses it as writing material for his own epiphanies (3.401–7). It is one of several metapoetic passages echoing Shakespeare’s scene of the torn letter which can be interpreted, once again, as allegorical representation of an anagrammatic poetics that, from the *Proteus* episode onwards, governs the rules of text production in *Ulysses*.

The *Proteus* episode is the first text in Joyce’s *oeuvre* that experiments with a stream of consciousness narrative as Stephen Dedalus takes a late morning stroll on Sandymount Strand. The first two paragraphs of the chapter alone feature several elements of what might be called Joyce’s protean poetics:

Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawreck, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane. [...] Diaphane, adiaphane. If you can put your five fingers through it it is a gate, if not a door. Shut your eyes and see.

Stephen closed his eyes to hear his boots crush crackling wrack and shells. You are walking through it howsomever. I am, a stride at a time. A very short space of time through very short times of space. Five, six, the *Nacheinander*. Exactly: and that is the ineluctable modality of the audible. Open your eyes! No. Jesus! [...] My two feet in his boots are at the end of his legs, *nebeneinander*. Sounds solid: made by the mallet of Los *demiurgos*. (*Ulysses* 3.1–20)

The chapter is multilingual as it uses bits and pieces of various languages. The multiperspectivity and multivocality of the narrative are further protean features: the chapter sets in with a subjectless sentence that reveals only at the end a possessive pronoun (“my”) to which voice and perspective can be assigned. After this, the chapter moves on in a seemingly reliable “basic opposition pattern” as it alternates between an extradiegetic narrative voice that traces and describes “the linear onward movement of Stephen’s walk” alongside the beach and an autodiegetic voice that relates “the circularly arabesque movements of his reflections” (Gabler 59) in internal monologues and dialogues. As “obvious” (Gabler 59) as this pattern may seem, the changing voices and perspectives are not easily told apart because Stephen’s voice occasionally takes over the description of what is happening on the beach and the extradiegetic narrative voice becomes playful and arabesque-like in turn. The narrative structure thus remains inherently protean. Andreas Mahler has argued that the *Proteus* episode marks a point in Joyce’s works where his narrative style shifts programmatically from a mimetic to a performative mode of writing in which “dysphoric world-making” ultimately turns into “euphoric text-making” (291), a process in which “the illusion of a plausible and

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<sup>11</sup> The chapters of the novel were originally only numbered with no direct indications of their hypertextual correspondence with passages from Homer’s *Odyssey*. However, in 1930 Stuart Gilbert included a schema that outlines the Homeric character, time, place, art, a bodily organ, as well as a narrative mode dominant in each chapter (30). As the Gilbert schema’s publication was sanctioned by Joyce, it has become customary to refer to the chapters by their mythical reference points.

consistent mimetic realization of a (seemingly pre-existent) world” is replaced by a playful poetics that eventually opens into a “liberated endless syntagmatic progression of (writable and written) ‘text’” (291). Mahler mentions onomatopoeic and anaphoric passages in *Proteus* as examples of Joyce’s “textual machinery” (294). I want to take this argument a little further as I demonstrate below that text production in *Ulysses* consists to a large extent of anagrammatic variations and combinatorial patterns, which, in turn, are introduced and prefigured in Stephen Dedalus’ own literary practice.

Invoking Aristotelian faculty psychology, Stephen ponders the difference between the “ineluctable modality of the visible” and the “audible”, thus illustrating the protean nature of sense perception, connecting it then to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s aesthetic categories of “nebeneinander” and “nacheinander” and thus to the *paragone* between ‘temporal arts’ (“Zeitkünste”), which rely on sequentiality, on one hand and ‘spatial arts’ (“Raumkünste”) like painting and sculpture on the other (cf. Gifford 45). The aesthetic principles that occupy Stephen’s mind are reflected in his movements and perceptions: “Stephen closed his eyes to hear his boots crush crackling wrack and shells. You are walking through it howsomever. I am, a stride at a time” (3.10–11). While Stephen engages in a linear movement that follows the sequential pattern of “nacheinander”, the narrative description of his movements obeys increasingly a spatialised pattern of “nebeneinander” that projects onto the “syntagmatic axis of combination” (Jakobson 358) a paradigm of velar plosives (“cr”) and internal rhymes (“ack”) that imitate the sound of his steps (cf. Mahler 292–94). In the syntagmatic sequencing of phonetically similar elements Joyce’s prose becomes not only increasingly poetic, it also becomes increasingly anagrammatic. As Stephen ‘crushes’ and ‘cracks’ the ‘wrack’ and the shells of Sandymount under his feet, his thought process brings about the first portmanteau of the book – “howsomever” – which lifts into syntagmatic presence an entire paradigm of words and compresses it into one: ‘however’, ‘somehow’, and ‘whatsoever’.<sup>12</sup>

Like the anagram and the proteus verse, portmanteaus disrupt the “Nacheinander” of words and letters and introduce an element of spatiality to poetic language. The poetological ruminations of *Proteus* thus introduce one of the most persistent stylistic features of the novel, whose protagonists are later revealed to be ardent anagrammatists themselves.<sup>13</sup> In *Scylla and Charybdis*, Stephen Dedalus bemoans in a range of anagrams Shakespeare’s poor treatment of Anne Hathaway, whom he left only his second-best bed:

Leftherhis  
Secondbest  
Leftherhis

<sup>12</sup> The linguistic characteristics, historical development, and semantic possibilities of Joyce’s portmanteau words have been investigated by scholars such as Derek Attridge (“Portmanteau”), Jordan Brower, and Antonia Zimmerlich (45–47). Brower observes a gradual increase of anagrammatic forms in Joyce’s writing, starting with simple neologisms and composites in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which then graduates to the repeated anagrammatic play and use of complex portmanteaus in *Ulysses*, culminating finally in *Finnegan’s Wake* (442).

<sup>13</sup> Anselm Haverkamp considers ‘paragrams’, ‘hypograms’, ‘cryptonyms’, ‘cryptograms’, and ‘achrostics’ as variations of the anagram and expands that list by ‘anagrammatic phenomena’ such as ‘alliteration’, ‘paronomasia’, ‘antonomasia’, ‘syllepsis’, ‘palindrome’, ‘echo’, and ‘pun’ (133).

Bestabed  
 Secabest  
 Leftabed. (9.701–6)

The *Ithaka* episode reveals young Leopold Bloom as a “kinetic poet” (17.19) and master of combinatorics who presents his beloved with an acrostic of his nickname “Poldy” on Valentine’s day (17.10–16), and who can jumble the components of his own name into a bunch of hilarious anagrams:

Leopold Bloom  
 Ellpodbomool  
 Molldopeloob  
 Bollopedoom  
 Old Ollebo, M.P. (17.404–9)

Occasionally, Joyce’s text is structured and perpetuated by homonyms, which constitute an extreme form of the anagram: in homonyms, a sequence of letters is not varied or permuted at all and yet may refer to completely different signifieds. The following passage is constructed around the homonyms of “Citron” and “Pleasant”:

Oranges and tissue paper packed in crates. Citrons too. Wonder is poor Citron still in Saint Kevin’s parade. [...] Pleasant evenings we had then. Molly in Citron’s basketchair. Nice to hold, cool waxen fruit, hold in the hand, lift it to the nostrils and smell the perfume. Like that, heavy, sweet, wild perfume. Always the same, year after year. They fetched high prices too, Moisel told me. Arbutus place: Pleasants street: pleasant old times. Must be without a flaw, he said. (4.204–210).

In this passage from the *Calypso* episode, Leopold Bloom spies a pile of Mediterranean citrus fruit on the market and instantly associates them with their verbal signifier “Citron”, which then reminds him of the name of an old neighbour, Mr. Citron, and thus stimulates a cascade of “pleasant” memories, which lead him to further recollections of “Pleasants Street”. The passage does not relate a coherent story or incident but is generated entirely by its anagrammatic language material and its associative potential.

Anagrammatic forms are occasionally expanded onto the level of syntax: the second section of the *Aeolus* chapter, for instance, features a syntactic palindrome that reverts the grammatical units of a sentence and thus recalls the mechanism of the Proteus verse:

Grossbooted draymen rolled barrels dullthudding out of Prince’s stores and bumped them up on the brewery float. On the brewery float bumped dullthudding barrels rolled by grossbooted draymen out of Prince’s stores. (7.21–24)

Anagrammatic forms in Joyce’s novel occur not only on the level of singular words and sentences but extend to the anagrammatic combination of phrases and texts in an extreme form of intertextual connectivity. This aspect of Joyce’s combinatorial poetics, too, is prefigured in the reading and writing practices described in *Proteus*. Stephen, who spent his youth at a catholic boarding school, recalls that he used to read “two pages apiece of seven books every night” (3.136), thus overthrowing linearity of plot and argument in his reading practice and replacing it with a combinatorial pattern instead. He then reminds himself of “Books” he was “going to write with letters for titles” (3.139), and imagines the critical dialogue they might have inspired:

Have you read his F? O yes, but I prefer Q. Yes, but W is wonderful. O yes, W. Remember your epiphanies written on green oval leaves, deeply deep copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria? Someone was to read them there after a few thousand years, a mahamanvantara. Pico della Mirandola like. Ay, very like a whale. (3.139–45)

Obviously, young Stephen had Shakespeare's Folio and Quarto editions in mind when he imagined writing books with letters for titles, and he expands that sequence by a third volume entitled "W", thus inscribing himself ambitiously into the Shakespearean tradition. In both his reading and his writing practice, Stephen expands the anagrammatic scope from the permutation of words and letters to the permutation of larger chunks of text: by selecting several pages from a set of several books and recombining them in a new sequential order, he creates a new text from existing ones. Stephen's habit of writing his ideas on "green oval leaves" (3.141), which are then to be collected in the libraries of the world, continues his practice of permuting and combining entire texts and stories. It echoes Virgil's myth of the Sibyl of Cumae even more directly than Shakespeare and must be read equally as a metapoetic invocation of protean anagrammatism, especially since Stephen compares his writing practice to that of Pico della Mirandola, who was himself a Christian kabbalist and practitioner of the combinatorial art.<sup>14</sup>

Stephen's practices of reading and writing illustrate Julia Kristeva's anagrammatic concept of intertextuality according to which each word in a literary text demarcates a "croisement des surfaces textuelles" ("Mot" 144), an "intersection of textual surfaces" ("Word" 35). Kristeva's radical model suggests that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations" ("Word" 37), thus installing a combinatorial model as the basis of all literary communication. Joyce's *Ulysses* is not just a hypertext of a clearly defined pretext, it programmatically integrates myriads of intertextual references, which constitute another aspect of the novel's combinatorial poetics. The hypogrammatic reference to the "green oval leaves" (3.141) of the Cumaean Sibyl is particularly interesting as it has poetological implications of its own. Aeneas' consultation of the Sybil constitutes the Roman equivalent of the consultation of Proteus in the *Odyssey*. The temple of the Sibyl was founded by Stephen's mythical namesake, Daedalus, as he "fled the realm of Minos" (6.22). Like Joyce's "Old Father Ocean" (3.483), the Sybil is portrayed as an unpredictable shape changer.<sup>15</sup> Her habitat is described as a gigantic "cavern perforated a hundred times" (6.67) with prophesy spouting mouths, which are, in turn, plastered with inscribed leaves. Aeneas asks the Sybil to deliver her revelations

<sup>14</sup> Pico della Mirandola, whose writings were an important influence for both Shakespeare and Joyce, is usually seen as the founder of the Christian Kabbalah. He was familiar with kabbalist writings such as the *Zohar* and the *Sefer Yezira*, as well as with the works of the medieval Spanish kabbalist Abraham Abulafia and used their combinatorial techniques as well as the letters of the Hebrew alphabet to generate the name of Jesus and to thus affirm the catholic faith (cf. Reichert 198, see also: Yates 19–27, Eco 120–126).

<sup>15</sup> The Sibyl's reaction to Aeneas' inquiry reads very similar to the transformations of Proteus:

And as she spoke neither her face  
nor hue went untransformed, nor did her  
hair stay neatly bound: her breast heaved, her wild heart  
Grew large with passion (VI.76–80)





Stephen has apparently continued by collecting paper slips from the library as his writing material of choice. Like Julia's tearing and recombining of Proteus's letter in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Stephen's writing practice invokes a combinatorial poetics that continues to unfold throughout *Ulysses*.

Combinatorial texts, as shown above, are characterized by an aspect of automation. Narrative coherence as well as authorial autonomy are surrendered to an algorithmic permutation and syntagmatic generation of signifiers that obfuscates traditional modes of mimetic representation and plot construction. In Joyce's case, that aspect of combinatorial automation is realised on various levels. Firstly, Joyce's *Proteus* episode dispenses with a unifying narrative perspective and offers it up to fragmentation and multiplication instead. Secondly, the novel constantly generates and perpetuates its verbal material according to the Jakobsonian principle of similarity. It thus relies on the autopoetic potential of its language material. And finally, each subsequent chapter is subject to an externally established formal principle that determines its narrative and poetic form. The *Aeolus* episode follows the typographic and narrative conventions of the newspaper, the *Sirens* episode is composed according to the formal patterns of the *fuga al canonem* (which is a combinatorial pattern in its own right), *Ithaca* follows the form of a scholastic treatise, etc. (cf. Gilbert 30, Iser 324–26). The rules and conventions assigned to each chapter assume the function of an algorithmic combination pattern. They resemble Julia's agitated hands or the wind that shuffles the leaves of the Sibyl and add an element of contingency in which the categories of author and narrator are replaced by what Hugh Kenner poignantly termed "The Arranger" (22–25).

### Conclusion

Both Shakespeare's Julia and Joyce's Stephen Dedalus disassemble a letter and then proceed to use it productively in an act of poetic creation and animation. In each case, the scene of the torn letter turns into a metapoetic scene of writing that forecasts a combinatorial poetics about to unfold in each text and subsequently in each author's *oeuvre*. The metapoetic implications of the scene are, in both cases, deepened and amplified by the additional intertextual layer of Virgil's description of the Cumean Sybil and the combinatorial media practices used in her prophesies. Julia's tearing and reassembling of Proteus' love letter programmatically establishes a pattern of permutation and transformation as the prevailing poetic principle of Shakespeare's romantic comedies and casts, at the same time, a critical spotlight on a code of love that is based on the arbitrary permutation and recombination of signifiers, couples, and body parts. Similarly, Stephen's practice of writing his poetic revelations on random "leaves" (3.141) and paper scraps can be read as illustrative of the anagrammatic poetics about to unravel in the remaining chapters of *Ulysses* and Joyce's work in general. In each case, it is not merely the myth of Proteus, but specifically the reference to the combinatorial paradigm introduced by Scaliger's Proteus line that provides a productive perspective for the analysis of the poetic principles governing each text.

The motif of the torn letter is also the element that establishes an intertextual relationship between Shakespeare's earliest comedy and Joyce's *Ulysses* and thus allows for a comparative reading of the two texts in the first place. Because of each

scene's poetological ramifications, the discovery of this additional intertextual connection is not just a philological miscellany to be added to the many investigations of Joycean Shakespeare references. The motif of the torn letter constitutes, in the terminology of Julia Kristeva, an "intersection of textual surfaces" ("Word" 35) in which the word 'letter' regulates and controls what Kristeva describes as the mutation "from diachrony to synchrony" ("Word" 37). The diachronous structure of literary history is thus transformed into a momentary instance of synchronicity in which Joyce's text becomes early modern as much as Shakespeare's turns into a modernist text experiment.

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### Zusammenfassung

In einer vergleichenden Lektüre metapoetischer Passagen in William Shakespeares früher Komödie *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1590) und der *Proteus*-Episode aus dem *Ulysses* (1922) von James Joyce arbeitet dieser Beitrag die poetologischen Implikationen der *Proteus*-Mythe und ihrer Rezeption in poetischen und poetologischen Texten der Renaissance heraus. Seit Iulius Caesar Scaligers Einführung des sogenannten Proteus-Verses in den *Sieben Büchern der Dichtkunst* (1561) ist diese mit einer kombinatorischen Poetik assoziiert, die bei Shakespeare in der Anfangsszene, in welcher ein Liebesbrief zerrissen, permutiert, und kombiniert wird, allegorisch aufgerufen und fortan als poetologische Matrix der Liebeskomödie lesbar ist. Im *Ulysses* wird in diversen Szenen des Lesens und Schreibens ebenfalls eine kombinatorische Poetik aufgerufen, welche die narratologischen und poetischen Verfahrensweisen des *Proteus*-Kapitels beschreibbar macht und anagrammatische Formen im *Ulysses* sowie in Joyces Spätwerk antizipiert.