

Love and Silence in the Renaissance: From the Italian Novella Tradition to its English Legacy

Flavia Palma
University of Verona

Abstract

The Medieval and Renaissance European literary traditions are testimony to a habit of considering language as the primary medium for love, but there were also interesting exceptions connected to the opposite power of silence. Matteo Bandello's novella III 17 is a case in point: the tale is centred upon the impotence of amorous words and the paradoxical power of silence. Bandello to some extent appropriated a topic already present in Boccaccio's Decameron, but it was his novella that fascinated sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England: his tale appeared in both English prose and verse translations, as well as being adapted for the stage in a comedy.

This paper considers how this peculiar relation between silence and words within love bonds was treated by Bandello and then appropriated both in narrative and theatrical contexts by English writers such as William Painter, Geoffrey Fenton, John God, Gervase Markham, and Lewis Machin.

Keywords: love, silence, words, Bandello, English adaptations

In his *De Amore*, a seminal tract on love written at the end of the twelfth century, Andreas Capellanus dedicates most of his discussion to the relation between erotic desire, courtship and the power of words. He asserts that the beloved may be conquered in three ways, that is, through beauty, honour or eloquence, adding that the clever use of words can make people fall in love, even if they do not want to (Andrea Cappellano, 1980: 16-19). The ideas developed in this treatise would influence European literature also after the

Middle Ages. Indeed, alongside the principles asserted by seminal Renaissance theoretical works on love written by philosophers such as Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino, who applied Plato's philosophy to Christian beliefs problematizing the idea of love and creating more sophisticated theories, traces of Andreas Capellanus's courtly love code are still present in several sixteenth-century dialogues and treatises. For instance, in his *Libro de Natura de Amore* (1525) Mario Equicola highlights the power of eloquence and amorous speeches, while Francesco Sansovino proclaims in his *Ragionamento* (1545) that 'le parole hanno più forza che tutte l'altre operazioni' ('words have more power than any other device') on women (168).

However, this trend does not prevent the development of alternative literary examples representing a failure of amorous words and a contrary success of silence as a device used to induce a woman to surrender to her lover. These predominant theories only allow for silence to signify the lover's shyness or fear, and his consequent inability to express his feelings (Betussi, 1912: 66-68). At the same time they consider silence as a clever strategy to avoid annoying the beloved with too much talk (Sansovino, 1912: 176-77). Thus, these few concessions to silence by contrast emphasise the centrality of words as the main means to win the beloved. Nevertheless, an evident example of the subversion of such ideas can be found in Matteo Bandello's 1554 collection of novellas, in particular tale III 17, where amorous words are completely ineffectual, even harmful, while dumbness, at first imposed and then deliberately adopted, makes the lover finally succeed. Bandello's tale is particularly interesting also because it influenced English literature deeply through François de Belleforest's French version (*Histoires Tragiques*, 1559, 13), appearing in English prose and verse translations, as well as being adapted for the stage. If William Painter (*Palace of Pleasure*, 1567, II 27) and Geoffrey Fenton (*Certain Tragical Discourses*, 1567, 11) translated in prose Bandello's novella, John God (or Goubourne)¹ wrote the narrative poem *A Discourse of Great Cruelty of a Widow* (1570), and Gervase Markham and Lewis Machin the Jacobean comedy *The Dumb Knight* (1608).² These foreign versions display an even more explicit treatment of the bond between love, words, and silence.

Before discussing the relation between these texts on the treatment of such a bond, it may be worth briefly considering their plot. This is the story of a young gentleman, Filiberto of Virle, who falls in love with a beautiful but cruel widow, Zilia, and does all his best to conquer her, but in vain.³ When he falls ill because of his unreciprocated love, Zilia is persuaded to talk to him. Filiberto tries to conquer her for the last time using words, but, failing in his attempt, promises to do anything she will ask him in exchange for a kiss. She agrees on his request, yet she orders him to keep silence for three years. Thus paid for his promise, Filiberto leaves for France, where he joins the French army and fights valorously. In return for his prowess, the king offers a huge reward to whoever will cure him, however, to avoid ineffective attempts, he also orders that who tries, but fails must pay the same sum or die. Convinced that Filiberto is still in love with her, Zilia travels to France to release him from his vow and claim the money. When the knight meets her and understands that she has gone there only for the reward, he decides to revenge: he will keep silent in spite of receiving her amorous favours, so as to get her imprisoned and eventually

sentenced to death. Finally, once revenged upon her, he starts speaking again and tells his entire story to the king, securing Zilia's release.

The story can be divided into two main sections: the first one portrays the ineffectiveness of amorous words, while the second one highlights it in contrast to the power of silence. Nevertheless, all three English narratives, compared to the Italian original, display from the outset the centrality of the conflicting relation between words and silence: Painter (at the beginning of his tale) and God (in his 'Preface to the Reader') immediately stress Philiberto's strange choice to renounce speech, which they define as the faculty that distinguishes men from wild beasts; on the contrary, Fenton is much more resolute, since in the 'Argument' of his tale he terms Philiberto's behaviour a real folly.

In its first part, the tale basically portrays a stereotyped love situation: the male character tries to conquer his beloved by talking to her, writing love letters, and asking for the help of intermediaries, so that according to the predominant love theories he should sooner or later manage to fulfil his mission. However, this aim is not achieved because his amorous words prove ineffective, and this is shown in several ways. For instance, Bandello writes that 'egli [...] volendo con lei parlare ed entrar in lunghi ragionamenti, ella a le due parole prendeva congedo e a casa se n'andava' ('even if he desired to talk to her and have long conversations, she went home after few words') (337). Zilia's uncommunicativeness is made more expressive in the English narrative versions, where the widow talks to Philiberto, but the more he declares his love for her, the more she pretends not to understand, changing the subject to housework, and frustrating her suitor's efforts deliberately. Thus Painter concludes that 'these two, of diuers Affections, and mooued wyth contrary thoughtes, spake one to another, without apt aunswere to eyther's talke' (162).⁴ This episode portrays a short-circuit in communication, so that instead of unifying the characters, words increasingly divide them as the dialogue progresses.

Filiberto eventually seems to have a chance when Zilia decides to meet him, but even in this case love speeches fail. Insisting on saying that Filiberto's are 'accomodate parole' ('well-shaped words') (340), Bandello paradoxically highlights their impotence, thus undermining a long literary tradition. Indeed, as the failure cannot be ascribed to the gentleman's poor command of rhetoric, because, as he is courtly and accomplished, he must be a skilful orator, words themselves prove to be the problem, as they do not guarantee the lover any success. The additions in the English narratives, which develop brief hints in Bandello's novella, are further instances of the breakdown of the power of amorous words, both written and spoken. A case in point is the introduction of Philiberto's love letter, whose effects are harmful, driving Zilia to a vindictive rage, as she judges the letter an attempt to deprive her of her honour. The self-defeating nature of words is reconfirmed by the woman's reaction to Philiberto's speech during their meeting: while in Bandello she calmly declines her suitor's requests, in Painter, Fenton, and God she angrily defends her chastity against what she considers Philiberto's false words. In Painter she says: 'You haue talked, and written inough' (178); while in God she adds: 'the longer that you talke, / the more you me misuse' (sig. D2 r). Neither written nor spoken words can

conquer her. Compared to *Bandello*, the English authors⁵ interestingly seem to anticipate Philiberto's later dumbness by stressing his speechlessness in front of Zilia's rejection: if Painter writes that 'the infortunate Lord of Virle, hearing this sharpe sentence, remayned long time without speach' (179), God expands this even further:

This lucklesse man, when he had heard
this sentence, straight was mute:
Pretending with this wilful dame,
no longer dispute.
And then stooode still like to a Saint
that was both deafe and dumme:
His sprites agast to mummers like,
which nothing say but mumme.
(sig. D2 v)

The foreshadowing nature of Philiberto's reaction becomes apparent few lines later, when Zilia orders him to remain silent for three years. Thus, initially Philiberto is struck dumb with astonishment at his beloved's rejection, yet in all the versions of the story, from Zilia's imposition on, Philiberto's dumbness acquires different qualities depending on the circumstances: firstly it is perceived as a sort of 'punishment', then it highlights the hero's courage, and finally turns out to be an instrument of persuasion and revenge.

The second part of the tale, displaying the power of silence, begins when Filiberto pretends to be genuinely incapable of speaking rather than dumb by choice, since he wants to follow the code of honour according to which he must keep his promise. In spite of being impaired by speechlessness, this trait in fact turns out to enhance his prowess, rather than damaging it. In the English versions,⁶ it also affords him the new identity of 'dumb/mute' 'gentleman/knight/lord' he comes to be called by everybody instead of by his own name.

The most interesting evidence of the contrastive relation between amorous words and silence can be found in the meeting of the two protagonists in France. This episode represents the climax of the silence's strength, since in this very moment refusal to speak, rather than speech, becomes a source of power for the male lover, and the previous situation of the suitor and the unresponsive woman is reversed. Zilia talks to the knight with sweet words, aiming at wooing him into speech, but Filiberto touches his own tongue with his finger and shrugs his shoulders, declaring through signs his inability, or rather his rejection to speak. The gentleman's mute revenge, which stages a funny show made by falsely naïve gestures, highlights the power of silence over amorous words, so that the tale begins to suggest the superiority of wordless gestures to speech. Indeed, realising that her words are ineffectual, Zilia starts kissing Filiberto, whose constant dumbness grants him what no amorous speech has ever guaranteed him, since he is now able to possess Zilia sexually: 'a la mutola, egli prese quell'amoroso piacere di lei che tanto aveva desiderato' ('in a state of dumbness, he enjoyed the woman that he had so long desired') (*Bandello*, 1934: 345). Words remain functionless and unrequired also the following days, when Filiberto goes to bed with Zilia several times always wordlessly. Paradoxically,

he wins her thanks to the same ‘punishment’ she had condemned him to, while amorous words prove to be both powerless and counterproductive: instead of bringing the lovers closer, they separate them and put them into conflict. The English authors are even more inclined than Bandello to emphasise the ineffectiveness of Zilia’s words and the persuasive power of Philiberto’s dumbness. Fenton for example writes: ‘forgetting his ancient ceremonies, and amorous orations [...], he alleged now a dispense from speaking by her commandment only, practicing altogether (by signs) the use and execution of that which erst he had so hotly pursued, both by suit and long service’ (467). ‘Practicing by signs’ corresponds exactly to Bandello’s ‘a la mutola’.

Also when we come to the end of the story, the English authors prove likewise innovative in making it more sentimental than in the Italian original. While in Bandello Filiberto accuses Zilia of cruelty and then sends her back home, marrying another rich gentlewoman, in Painter and Fenton, before saying her goodbye, he sleeps with Zilia again once she has been released, and this temporary happy ending satisfies both of the characters; in God instead the knight marries Zilia, as she is now genuinely in love with him. In the latter case dumbness guarantees Philiberto an absolute victory in love, assuring him both sexual success and the fulfilment of his passion in marriage, while amorous words have caused him only pain.

Zilia’s cruelty and avidity are further emphasised when we move from these narratives to the comedy *The Dumb Knight*. In Act II, Mariana, who corresponds to Zilia, openly declares that her order aims at ridding herself of Philocles and punishing him for his foolish feelings:

Why so, now shall I not be troubled with vain chat,
Or idle prate of idle wantonness:
For love I cannot, therefore ’tis in vain;
Would all my suitors’ tongues I thus could rein!
Then should I live free from feign’d sighs and groans,
With, O take pity, ’tis your servant moans,
And such harsh stuff, that frets me to the heart.
(Markhan and Machin, 1825: 403)

Even if she seems here as cruel as Zilia, she soon proves to be very different from her. Indeed, even before Philocles rescues her, she has changed her mind about him: when the executor is about to cut her head, she wishes Philocles all the best, confessing her love. The fact that Mariana changes her mind quickly while Zilia does not, persisting for a long time in her cruel and greedy behaviour, increases the reader’s feeling that the revenge on Zilia is just. Besides, once again only dumbness is the reason why Mariana reassesses her actions and understands her real feelings for Philocles, while his heartfelt speeches never persuade her, but rather induce her to devise a test to punish him. Silence again proves to be the right device to succeed in love, and to assure the protagonist a full victory, leading him to conquer and marry his beloved, although in this comedy there is no allusion to sexual intercourses.

Nevertheless, it should be noticed that the association of love (and sex) and

forced or voluntary dumbness is not totally new in the Italian novella tradition, since it occurs in some novellas in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. For instance, in III 1 Masetto pretends to be deaf and mute in order to be employed as a gardener in a convent, with the intent of seducing the nuns. The abbess assumes that he must be harmless since no seduction can take place without words, but in fact his pretended handicap makes him the perfect lover for each nun, as the first one who sleeps with him explains: 'Egli è il miglior del mondo da ciò costui, ché, perché egli pur volesse, egli nol potrebbe né saprebbe ridire' ('He is the best in the world for this, because, even if he wanted, he could not tell anyone, nor would be able to') (Boccaccio, 2012: 231). However, Masetto does not reckon with the nuns' insatiability, and decides 'miraculously' to regain the power of speech in order to free himself from their requests, so that the strict bond between dumbness and sex becomes apparent.

In another novella in the *Decameron* (II 7), Cesare Segre detects a sort of mathematical proportion between incommunicability and sex, on the one hand, and communicability and chastity, on the other (152). Here, a Babylonian princess, Alatiel, on a voyage towards her fiancé, is shipwrecked, and has sexual relations with several different lovers, until she manages to return to her father, declaring her virginity and getting married. During her geographical and sexual peregrinations, she is forced to silence, because most of her lovers speak languages she does not understand: thus communication is restricted to gestures and sexual activity. Eventually she meets a family servant, whom she tells her story, and is advised by him to pretend that she lived for four years in a convent. Her getting back to speech will thus coincide with her return to 'chastity'. If silence is her distinguishing feature during her promiscuous days, words guarantee her return to 'virginity' and honest life. Boccaccio's attention to the power of silence in connection with love is a further proof of the sceptical scrutiny to which traditional assumptions about the primacy of language as a means to human intimacy could sometimes be subjected. If Laura Benedetti defines Masetto's silence as a strategy of conquest (253), the same label can be applied to some extent to Filiberto's dumbness too, as he uses this device voluntarily in order to obtain what he has craved for a long time. Nevertheless, this sexual desire should not be misunderstood, since the prevailing theories on love considered sex as a legitimate part of a relationship, if it is inspired by true feelings: not only Adreas Capellanus (30-33), but also several sixteenth-century theoretical writers did not forget the importance of the body, so that Leone Ebreo, in his seminal *Dialoghi d'Amore* (1535), asserted that a man who did not enjoy his love physically was like an evergreen tree, which did not lose his leaves, and yet was sterile (56-57). Thus, since Filiberto's feelings are initially pure and honest, he is not wrong if he wants his beloved to love him physically too, so that he eventually exploits silence in order to obtain his double aim: sexual intercourse, and revenge.

However, all the texts here analysed violate an important love rule, since amorous words prove themselves to be ineffective. While the cruel heart of the female character can partly justify this failure, it does not explain the parallel and paradoxical power that silence has. Both Filiberto and Zilia fail when they try to persuade the other one with amorous speeches, whereas, the knight, remaining silent, induces Zilia to give him what he wants. The exploitation

of this unusual seductive device prompts reflection. It would be interesting to understand if Bandello and his followers really intended to challenge the established tradition on love or if this was a mere literary trick. Besides, the fascination of Bandello's novella on several English writers can be related to early modern England's interest in the topic of silence, which involves many different genres, from treatises on female conduct, where it is seen at the same time as a proof of chastity and a sign of hidden rebellion, to Shakespeare's and Jonson's dramas.⁷ Thus, a comparative analysis of these different treatments can shed light on the mutable roles that silence played in those years.

Endnotes

- 1 For the problem of the author's name see Pruvost 1937 : 69.
- 2 Another English version can be found in *Westward for Smelts* (1620), but its short length makes it not particularly relevant in regard to the relationship between words, love, and silence. This is why I omitted it from this analysis.
- 3 The hero's name in Painter, Fenton, and God is Philiberto, while in the comedy the lovers' are called Philocles and Mariana.
- 4 See also Fenton, 1924: 436; and God, 1570: sig. A8 r.
- 5 See also Belleforest (Hook, 1948: 71).
- 6 Here they follow Belleforest.
- 7 See for example Lanier, 1994; Luckyj, 1993; and Oh, 2008

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Biography

Flavia Palma completed both her undergraduate and her postgraduate degrees in Italian Literature at the University of Verona (Italy). She is currently attending a PhD programme in Philology, Literature and Linguistics at the same University, and her research field is the Italian and English novella tradition in early modern period. She is also a copyeditor for the online peer-reviewed academic journal *Skenè. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies*.