Poetics of Power: Money as Sign and Substance in *Romeo and Juliet*

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"For the love of money is the root of all evil."
(I Timothy 6:10)

"A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh merry: but money answereth all things."
(Ecclesiastes 10:19)

With its roots so firmly planted in scriptural texts, it is not surprising that a paradoxical attitude toward money governed the minds and hearts of people throughout the Renaissance. While many denounced it as an absolute vice, others extolled its virtues, but most, like most of us today, undoubtedly held both notions at once and, depending upon the circumstances, wavered between the two. In the argot of current criticism, such paradoxes occur most frequently when a sign is detached from its referent in the material world. Separated from their objects in physical reality, signs become empty, devoid of substantive value. At the same time, however, such free floating signs often become powerful "operatives" that shape reality, and, depending upon the motives and the linguistic sophistication of the people who consciously or unconsciously manipulate language, the realities such conditions create range from the comic to the tragic. In Shakespeare’s works the paradoxical relationship between signs and the material world produces on the one hand the humorous, good-natured puns and wordplay of Feste or Dogberry and the witty repartee of Beatrice and Benedict or of Rosalind and Orlando. On the other hand, it allows for the salacious innuendos and half-truths of Don John and Iago. In any
one play, though, and in the material world in general, such conditions merge, alternate, overlap to render a "reality" that is genuinely paradoxical, a reality that is rich in pied beauty but one that is simultaneously devalued by insecurity and doubt.

In *Romeo and Juliet* such is the reality inscribed in and rendered by paradoxical attitudes toward money. As a physical substance, money—especially its concretized forms of gold and silver—occurs rarely and plays a fairly insignificant role, but in the few instances in which it is mentioned, money acts as a figure that encodes within itself the major dialectic of the play, particularly a dialectic of poetics and a dialectic of power. In the bifurcated reality of the play, the world of politics—the feud—and the world of romance—the protagonists' love affair—attitudes toward money function to authorize the aristocratic body, or they work to demystify it and thus become aligned with the "other." The scenes in which these attitudes are revealed, moreover, constitute, individually and collectively, complex matrices of psychology of information and psychology of form. They are scenes that create "an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite." At the same time that he builds a psychology of form in these scenes, however, Shakespeare deconstructs it, producing scenes that both satisfy and "dis-satisfy," scenes that through their eloquence both fulfill closure and activate "dis-closure."

Money as sign and substance occurs perhaps most noticeably in the troubling and untractable interchange between Peter and the musicians at the end of Act IV. When the musicians refuse Peter's request to play a "merry dump," Peter detaches signs from the material world. He says: "I will then give it you soundly," to which the musicians ask, "What . . . ?" and Peter retorts, "No money. . . ." From the musicians' point of view, Peter is painfully accurate in two contexts. In the first sense, Peter does give "it" to them, but the "it" is not the gold or silver the musicians desire or expect. Instead, he gives them his wit, with