



SCREEN ADAPTATIONS

SHAKESPEARE'S ROMEO AND JULIET

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEXT AND FILM

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
A brief history of *Romeo and Juliet* on screen

As we have established, Brooke's *Tragicall Historye* is Shakespeare's principal source – and the Bard follows him quite precisely. The marvel of Shakespeare's play is that he telescopes Brooke's tragedy, which occurs over several months, into several days. The principal challenge of the play thus becomes persuading audiences that Romeo and Juliet truly cannot live without each other, having known each other for less than a week. While such telescoping is particularly conducive to both the pacing and technology of cinematic narration, it is arguably *more* difficult to make Romeo and Juliet's romance believable on screen. Whereas page and stage tend to leave more to the individual imagination, film pre-selects and, hence, pre-determines the spectator's point-of-view. In other words, to a much greater degree than other media, traditional cinematic narration actually conditions viewers to forgo fantasies of their own making in favour of those constructed by the camera. Given that the average film length is less than 'two hours' traffic of our stage' (Prologue 12), the camera that takes on *Romeo and Juliet* must perform a yeoman's work to insure that the reality of 'love' lingers – from 'first sight' – to forever.

If, as Stephen Watson and Stephen Dickey explain, the Renaissance stage created a 'heavily allusive artistic culture,' then Shakespeare's plays embody a broader effort not only to reveal

the day-to-day 'workings of the human mind' but also to 'navigat(e) through the internal and external complexities of human experience by a layering of allusions, stories of varying degrees of proximity and vividness, most of them indirectly inherited, that tell us what to want and what to fear'.¹ Filmmakers arguably work through even more richly allusive material, since they traffic in words and spectacle, as well as the history of cinematic representation itself, eliciting memories of other films through a network of associations derived from a given film's style, casting choices, and mise-en-scène. Although the following chapters focus on the three most famous adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*: the Shakespearean spinoff better known as *West Side Story* (1961), Zeffirelli's 'flower child' version of 1968, and Baz Luhrmann's 1996 blockbuster, it is important to establish – as we have with the text(s) – the broader history of *Romeo and Juliet* films.

Perhaps it should not surprise us that from its earliest moments on screen, *Romeo and Juliet* was being adapted in ways that advanced the craft of cinema itself, forcing the camera to accommodate the extraordinary vicissitudes of emotion contained in the play by creating novel filming techniques. Fittingly, in the race to release the first screen adaptations, the Italians won, as Mario Caserini's Cines production appeared in 1908, and was swiftly followed by adaptations from the UK and the US, respectively. Of the three films released in 1908, there is no question that the US-made Vitagraph production set the standard. Pre-figuring Baz Luhrmann's inventive cinematic vocabulary, this production, starring Florence Turner, employs seventeen different camera angles, cross-cutting as well as location shooting and off-camera editing – all for a film that lasts less than fifteen minutes. Similarly, one wonders if

 ¹ Watson and Dickey, p. 146.

Luhrmann knew of Gerolamo Lo Savio's twenty-five minute adaptation of 1911, for this film – shot on location in the streets of Verona – is the first to depict Juliet waking while Romeo is still in his death throes, which is precisely the gambit to which Luhrmann will return. Unlike cinematic adaptations of other Shakespeare plays, *Romeo and Juliet* immediately inspired spinoffs which were, remarkably, occurring in tandem with these early adaptations. Although little is known of the 1902 film titled *Burlesque on Romeo and Juliet*, two spinoffs of note appeared less than ten years later: *Romeo and Juliet in Town* (Otis Turner 1910), which focuses on Juliet Brown and Romeo Smith as two lovers torn apart by their feuding families, and *The Indian Romeo and Juliet* (Larry Trimble 1912), another silent, Vitagraph one-reeler that tells the story of the star crossed lovers from the perspective of Native American tribal warfare.

Of course, all of the above films are short, silent productions – a point that seems particularly ironic in the case of our most loquacious playwright – indeed, a contradiction in terms, for how can anyone conceive of a 'silent' Shakespeare? As the hundreds upon hundreds of silent Shakespeare films attest, the more important point is that cinema could not be conceived of apart from Shakespeare – above all other possible candidates for the translation of 'literature' into film – during the pre-sound era. Moreover, among the plays themselves, Robert Hamilton Ball notes that '*Romeo and Juliet* was clearly the most popular subject for Shakespeare film . . .', adding that early cinema in particular found in Shakespeare a means of 'draw(ing) and hold(ing) audiences who found pleasure in the relatively new experience of watching moving images on a screen'.² Kenneth Rothwell has famously

² Robert Hamilton Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film: A Strange Eventful History* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1968), p. 235, p. 29.

observed that Shakespeare – particularly with respect to the Vitagraph Series – served to elevate the status of early cinema by investing it with artistic legitimacy, so powerful was the ‘enormous cultural capital’ that the Bard possessed.³ And though the limitations of silent film were staggering compared to the kind of technologies that would emerge within three decades of cinema’s birth, the stalwart champions of this new ‘electric theater’ – among them, the US’s first and foremost critic of filmed Shakespeare, Stephen W. Bush – argued vehemently that ‘there is no play of Shakespeare that cannot be retold in moving images’.⁴ And the rest is silence or, better put, history.

Well, not exactly, for in 1916, two of the great studios, Metro and Fox, went head-to-head with their first feature-length productions of *Romeo and Juliet* in celebration of Shakespeare’s 300th birthday. Though both films are now lost, they represent a crucial moment in the rise of cinema as we know it; the fact that the two studios fought for the first release date and the best quality picture tells us that the then-emergent film industry was beginning to think of itself as a contender with other forms of popular entertainment, indeed, an art form in its own right, rather than a poor imitation of theatre. Fox beat Metro to the punch and to the quality mark by featuring the handsome Francis X. Bushman in the part of Romeo. (Bushman’s performance proved far superior to Fox’s Romeo, Harry Hilliard, a musical comedy star who was cast chiefly because he looked like Bushman.) Not surprisingly, *Romeo and Juliet* proved to be Hilliard’s first – and only – film. Uncannily balancing the Metro production’s male talent was Fox’s casting of the famous ‘vamp’

³ Kenneth Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 12.

⁴ Stephen W. Bush, *Motion Picture World* 5 Dec. 1908, pp. 446–47.

actress Theda Bara as Juliet, whose pathos-drenched performance topped Metro's Beverly Bayne by a country mile. In other respects, however, the films were well-matched: Metro boasted a budget of \$250,000 and a cast of 600, while Fox countered by advertising a cast of 2500 persons. As the October release date drew nigh, the new-sprung grudge between the studios intensified. Metro warned the public: 'Don't be misled. There is one and only one Special Production de Luxe of Shakespeare's Love Story of the Ages . . . Don't be misled by inferior imitations of a masterpiece'.⁶ Indeed, there can be no doubt from extant accounts of the films that Metro was superior to the Fox production. No detail was ignored, as Ball observes, '(c)ontrary to the usual practice, the cast learned Shakespeare's lines and spoke them in the film'.⁶ A production that was incomparably long - two and a quarter hours - the Metro *Romeo and Juliet* was warmly received by critics and audiences alike, as one review from *Moving Picture World* attests: 'Of the twelve thousand inches of film devoted to the portrayal . . . not a single one is superfluous'.⁷ George F. Blaisdell concludes his rave review in terms that will draw a knowing chuckle from contemporary cinephiles, who have made similar claims about Shakespeare's gift as a 'filmmaker': 'It has demonstrated that Shakespeare dead three hundred years penned in his youth lines that stamp him as the greatest title builder in the world of to-day'.⁷ Indeed, the reviews were in, and the consensus was that the motion picture had, for the first time in history, rendered Shakespeare immortal.

⁵ Quoted in Ball, p. 236.

⁶ Quoted in Ball, p. 237.

⁷ George F. Blaisdell, quoted in Ball, p. 238.

The reception of the Fox *Romeo and Juliet* was less enthusiastic, though Theda Bara's performance was universally commended – particularly given that, both before and after this film, she had been known exclusively as a classic *femme fatale* or 'vamp'. Hence, as Juliet, she became a 'femme fatale' of a different order, playing the part of a classic tragic heroine that she embraced to the fullest. In an article written by Bara herself, she rationalised the excess of emotion – and eroticism – she felt the part required; having given 'the character a great deal of study', she 'discovered that Juliet lived in a period of passionate abandon. Italy, in the days of *Romeo and Juliet*, was no place for a Sunday-school girl'.⁹ But Bara was forced to carry the production on her shoulders, for according to all accounts, Metro trumped Fox – beating the rival studio to the release date and, as indicated above, surpassing it in quality. Perhaps this explains why, in contrast to the Metro production, which made only one significant alteration to the text (Rosaline actually appears on screen), Fox was more daring, devoting an entire scene to a Da Porto-style ending in which Juliet awakes to find Romeo alive, but poisoned, and they perform a drawn-out but nevertheless heart-wrenching conclusion that culminates in Juliet's suicide when, at last, 'the potent poison o'ercrows (Romeo's) spirit' (*Hamlet* 5.2.305). There was some consolation in the fact that the Fox production actually fared better on the international scene, as it was booked into venues ranging from the Stratford Shakespeare Festival to Sydney, where the film was said to have commanded as much as two shillings for admission – no small sum in 1916.

By far the most interesting early sound version of *Romeo and Juliet* also happens to be the first known Hungarian adaptation.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Theda Bara, quoted in Ball p. 240.

István Kató's animated short film (1931) created entirely in silhouette. The film literalises, in surprisingly subtle ways, the tensions built into the play between 'day', which is invariably associated with death, and 'night' which, for *Romeo and Juliet*, is the province of life and love. Though historians would likely rather ignore MGM's lavish 1936 adaptation, directed by George Kukor, the film – despite its failure at the box office and in posterity – is of historical importance as the first feature length effort to adapt *Romeo and Juliet* as a 'high period' film. Assembled with the care it takes to synchronise the tiny gears of a watch, this *Romeo and Juliet* combined the best talent of its day. From its acclaimed director and Tchaikovskian score to its all-star cast, multi-million dollar financing, distinguished screenwriter (Talbot Jennings) and, above all, its visionary producer Irving Thalberg – the watchmaker who oversaw every aspect of the film – *Romeo and Juliet* seemed predestined to make history as the Hollywood studio system's first 'legitimate' Shakespearean masterpiece of the sound era. From Thalberg's purist perspective, earlier adaptations did not qualify as truly 'Shakespearean': the Pickford/Fairbanks *Taming of the Shrew* (1929), for example, relied too heavily on interpolated dialogue; likewise, the Reinhardt/Dieterle (1935) *Midsummer Night's Dream* compromised its status by casting contract actors who had no classical training, such as James Cagney and Mickey Rooney. By contrast, Thalberg dispatched agents to Verona to photograph the scenery, his crew studied paintings by the Renaissance masters – specifically, Botticelli, Bellini, Carpaccio, and Gozzoli – and academics from Harvard and Cornell were brought in as advisors. Indeed, Thalberg's film *did* make history – not as a blockbuster but, rather, as a bust – losing nearly one million dollars. The main problem with the adaptation was not its \$2 million dollar mise-en-scene but its principals: Norma Shearer played Juliet at thirty-seven while Leslie

Howard played Romeo at forty-two (the fifty-five year-old John Barrymore supplied the role of Mercutio while Basil Rathbone performed Tybalt at forty-four). In short, the film was a geriatric adaptation of Shakespeare's tale of teenage lovers; despite the garish sets, gorgeous costumes, and Tchaikovskian musical accompaniment, nothing could turn back time for these would-be youngsters.

Cukor and Jennings retained just under fifty percent of the play for the screenplay – possibly the most of any adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* – and interpolated several scenes (as is a commonplace among contemporary adaptations) involving Friar John, while reducing Friar Laurence's part. Agnes de Mille choreographed the lengthy Capulet Ball sequence, wherein she includes a vision of Rosaline patently resisting Romeo's charms, expanding upon Metro's introduction of Rosaline in its 1916 adaptation. The overall failure of *Romeo and Juliet* is believed to have contributed to the untimely death of Irving Thalberg, the film's producer and Shearer's husband. Nevertheless, the production is significant on a number of levels, particularly as the first Shakespeare film to be accompanied by a 'tie-in' book, replete with scholarly commentary from William Strunk Jr, better known for his famous grammar book, *The Elements of Style*. In fact, despite all its disappointments, the film received four major Oscar nominations: Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Actress, and Best Art Direction. Moreover, this Cukor-Thalberg vehicle left an indelible impression on other directors. Renato Castellani's *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, demonstrates knowledge of its filmic predecessor in the Capulet Ball scene, wherein Juliet, as in the Cukor-Thalberg production, willingly dances with Paris as someone with whom she is politely familiar. Similarly, Baz Luhrmann's 1996 version not only represents Juliet's reluctant but deferential dance with Paris as a display of filial duty, but also directly

references the Cukor-Thalberg film in its depiction of the balcony scene. Considered one of the most original renderings of this famous exchange, the balcony scene in Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* features a swimming pool as the central medium of Romeo's courtship; however, the Cukor-Thalberg adaptation – made six decades earlier – is the first to employ a pool as a key signifier of the architectural and social limits that Romeo 'o'erperches' in his pursuit of Juliet. Hence, even if the 1936 adaptation failed to impress audiences, it left its mark on future auteurs.

What could have been the first great film of *Romeo and Juliet* is Renato Castellani's 1954 adaptation. Deeply influenced by the post-war, Italian neo-realist movement, Castellani's style has been characterised as 'realismo rosa' (soft or 'pink' neorealism). This style maintains the raw quality of Italian neorealism while also mitigating the genre's ironic, deliberately painful juxtapositions of narrative understatement with bold visual contrasts, typically featuring Italy's war-ravaged landscape. Soft neorealism is indeed the ideal description of Castellani's *Romeo and Juliet*, for despite being shot in Technicolor, the film employs a palette of exquisitely muted colors, as the mollifying sepia tones and a combination of celadon, ochre, and antique rose hues persuade the audience that they have stepped into a faded Renaissance painting. The focus is rarely turned away from the principals, as Castellani fought to assert Romeo's sense of isolation; hence, Mercutio and Friar Laurence – not to mention the Nurse – are virtually non-existent in the film. Visual interpolations abound in this adaptation; one of the more poignant ones occurs when the angry Montague pulls his banished son from his mother's final embrace; another interpolation shows Juliet and the Nurse amidst a handful of women, patiently passing their lives away sewing – drawing attention to the fate feared most by Renaissance girls – becoming a 'spinster'. Though described by one

critic as 'a sumptuous travelogue' rather than a film, Castellani's exquisitely composed adaptation won the *Grand Prix* at the Venice Film Festival.

Unfortunately, the hideously-dubbed soundtrack unwittingly makes the film resemble a Renaissance period version of a classic kung fu parody. Were it not for the lack of synchronisation that leads to comical miscues such as the brawling Capulet's taunt 'what, drawn - ?' before Benvolio draws his sword, this film would likely receive the recognition it deserves as one of the most aesthetically sophisticated Shakespeare adaptations ever created. Yet it would be remiss not to note that Castellani's film is also distinguished by its bold and frequently-cited opening gambit, in which Sir John Gielgud impersonates William Shakespeare himself. With a readily identifiable voice and distinguished face, Gielgud-as-'Shakespeare' thrusts the audience into the playful milieu of the 'neo': the only respite they will receive from the realism - howsoever 'softly' rendered - that relentlessly reminds them of the war-torn lives that Castellani's art imitates.

In the decades before, during, and after Castellani's adaptation, three somewhat unlikely *Romeo and Juliet* films were made: a loose adaptation from India, titled *Anjuman* (Akhtar Hussein 1948), the 1959 Egyptian film *Hassan and Naima*, which transposes *Romeo and Juliet* into Islamic culture, and the Oscar-nominated *Los Tarantos* (Francisco Rovira Beleta 1963) a Spanish, flamenco-style adaptation that followed on the heels of *West Side Story*'s success. Although the film is based on *La historia de los Tarantos* by Alfredo Mañas, this story of feuding gypsy factions is, in and of itself, an adaptation of Shakespeare's play - the major difference being that, in the end, Rafael and Juana are killed by the Paris figure, Curro. Hence, what is particularly interesting is the extent to which films such as this and the 1989 re-make *Montoyas Y Tarantos*

(Vicente Escrivá) hint at the textual polyvocality that characterises Shakespeare's own adaptation of the legendary love story.

Beleta's film is important not just as one of the first Spanish-language adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*, but also as a political statement during Franco's dictatorship, at which time the Catalan language – and sundry other expressions of its culture – was officially banned. Indeed, Beleta's decision to adapt Mañas's story of Catalan Gypsies (and, thus, a marginalised group within another marginalised group) at this historical juncture cannot help but be interpreted as an act of social justice and cultural reclamation. This message is an embedded one, to be sure, as the film largely becomes a vehicle (and, as it turned out, swan song) for the legendary Flamenco dancer Carmen Amaya. Employing both black-and-white and colour sequences to create a sense of heightened realism, Beleta's adaptation takes place, significantly, in the now non-existent district of Somorrostro, in Barcelona. Like Shakespeare's feuding aristocrats, the Catalanian Gypsies are 'a community defined by a kinship network and a territory' and, therefore, it is no surprise that the *Romeo and Juliet* characters meet at a wedding, where precisely such ties are celebrated.¹⁰ Interestingly, though, as ethnographer David Lagunas Arias points out, Gypsy weddings are marked by a unique division of social space in which 'single and married women occupy the central stage at the ball', while 'men remain in the outer edge of the space'¹¹ On a practical level, this arrangement allows for the virtuoso performances of Amaya to take center stage, while also facilitating Rafael's initial infatuation with Juana. Their love-at-first-sight meeting is, much like the one featured in Baz Luhrmann's film,

¹⁰ David Lagunas Arias, *Romani Studies* 5, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2000), p. 51.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

a wordless cacophony of gazes and clapping; moreover, the lovers' first exchange culminates in an underwater kiss – a scene to which Luhrmann is indebted in several instances. On another level, the culturally-specific negotiation of the ritualised wedding space enables Beleta to take liberties with Shakespeare that highlight the film's Catalanian Gypsy context. For example, in dances and at weddings in particular, it is the mothers 'who exercise control and meta-languages halfway between the men and the other women'.¹² Hence, *Los Tarantos* differs from Shakespeare's play in its augmented treatment of one mother in particular – Rafael's mother Angustias – who intercedes on behalf of the lovers but, of course, to no avail. Similar to the pathological paternalism embodied by the figure of Old Capulet in Shakespeare's play, the patriarchal structure of Catalanian Gypsy culture makes it all too easy for Juana's father, Rosendo, to overrule Angustias's hopes for the couple, on the grounds that their households are, in fact, historic enemies.

The inevitable tragedy begins to unfold with the introduction of the Paris/Tybalt figure (Curro), who slays Rafael's friend, Mojigondo (Mercutio), not long after Mojigondo has performed what will be (unbeknownst to him) his last dance – the equivalent of Mercutio's Queen Mab performance in this Flamenco transposition. Taking the ethnic tensions and Latin-American machismo to a higher level than perhaps even *West Side Story* before it, Beleta's adaptation is implicitly more violent than Shakespeare's play; Curro, for example, physically abuses Juana out of jealousy, creating the sense of urgency that leads the lovers to consummate their relationship before they marry (Rafael and Juana intend to elope the next day). Given that the two have been covertly communicating with each other through pigeon messengers, their murder by Curro –

¹² Ibid.

who finds them hiding in the crammed pigeon coop - serves as a rustic parallel to the suffocating Capulet mausoleum. In retribution, Juana's brother Sancho kills Curro. The film concludes with the remaining family members grieving together, as an indication to the audience that their 'ancient grudge' has been, with their children, laid to rest. The final tableau shows the children from the two families holding hands, as they walk with the carrier pigeon down the beach. If Beleta's film is an unacknowledged source in Lurhmann's film, then Doug Lanier argues that *Los Tarantos* is, in turn, undeniably influenced by *West Side Story*, contending that 'the look of the villains, the use of music and dancing, the urban barrio milieu, and several specific shots . . .' are all indebted to the earlier film.¹³

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, *Romeo and Juliet* and cinematic innovation have historically gone hand-in-hand. Armando Acosta's 1990 adaptation is no exception, for it features only a solitary 'live' actor, with the remainder of the cast supplied by cats. The voices of the cats, however, are provided by a host of superluminary stars, including Francesca Annis as Juliet, Vanessa Redgrave as Lady Capulet, Ben Kingsly as Capulet, and Maggie Smith as Rosalyne. John Hurt cross dresses to play a bag-lady-turned-boat-lady in keeping with the film's setting in Venice, famous for its feral cats. (Feral cats were also brought in from New York and Ghent, perhaps for a more multicultural look and sound.) Below, John Hurt-the-boat-woman shares his thoughts on the production:

Armando Acosta was the American director. He had all sorts of people in Belgium who had all given up their salaries, I didn't know this at the time, and they decided to do a production

¹³ Douglas Lanier, 'Film Spin-Offs and Citatlons', in *Shakespeares after Shakespeare: An Encyclopedia of the Bard In Mass Media Culture*, Vol. 1 (2 Vols.) (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 2007), p. 275.

almost entirely with cats. And he would go on at great length saying: 'You just want to watch that cat. It is so stunning, the cat that is playing Juliet.' And I thought, I've got to go in for this ride. This can't be anything but interesting. I didn't ask him why he wanted me to be a boat-woman. I think he felt that I had some great and deep spirituality that was going to fill the role. And obviously he felt that I was going to have some great affinity with cats, too. When one actually jumped off the boat and into the canal and wasn't able to swim, he found there was a very deep significance in this. I did suggest to him that it was not a good idea. It was a fairly extraordinary film.¹⁴

Extraordinary indeed, for Acosta spared no time – or expense – in seeing what many viewed as a 'pipe dream' through to reality. The score features the music of Sergel Prokofiev and Emanuel Verdi's music for *Romeo and Juliet*, and was performed by the London Symphony Orchestra under the conduction of Barry Wordsworth and Andre Previn. Not surprisingly, Acosta is reported to have spent nearly five thousand hours in the cutting room to create the final, two-hour product from more than two hundred hours of footage.

Running the gamut from silent film to cel animation, *Romeo and Juliet* has also been adapted for the children's series: *Shakespeare: The Animated Tales*. In several of the *Tales*, unique forms of animation are employed; one features stop-action photography using large-scale wooden puppets, while the other involves painting on glass – the fascinating effect of which is a visual palimpsest – as each scene carries something of the preceding one with it.

¹⁴ 'Interview', *The Guardian*, Thursday, April 27 2000, http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2000/apr/27/guardianinterviewsatbflsouthbank1#article_continue (last accessed 11/08/09).

However, *Romeo and Juliet* was to be approached traditionally from all angles, as the time-worn technique cel animation carried the day and a controversial sequence was edited out of the final film. Indeed, this adaptation initially contained 'sexual content', as a consummation scene was, for a time, initially part of the production, courtesy of the production team's more risqué Russian animators. However, their more prudish British co-producers insisted that the scene be removed; the compromise struck between the 'rival households' was to include the post-consummation scene, featuring its famous lark/nightingale *aubade*.

Some scholars have alleged that *Romeo and Juliet* is the most filmed play of all time. One of the major issues in determining which movies genuinely qualify as adaptations is determining the extent to which a given film is inherently 'Shakespearean' – a quality that does not necessarily demand the use of Shakespeare's language – as Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* has so brilliantly demonstrated. Indeed, what is it about *West Side Story* that makes it qualify as Shakespearean, while the 1941 musical film *Playmates* (David Butler) – a story about Romeo the swing musician and Juliet the opera singer (whose father respects classical music exclusively) – continually slips under the radar of Shakespearean film anthologies, dictionaries, and encyclopedias?

The answer to such questions will always be idiosyncratic; certainly, every film whose plotline contains forbidden love and feuding families will not make the cut. But it is worth noting that, in and of itself, there are more than 230 known spinoffs and citations of *Romeo and Juliet*, with the vast majority of them hinging on both of these themes, while often duplicating other Shakespearean characters and subplots. Those with 'happy endings' clearly belong to the category of spinoff rather than adaptation; but what do we do with those films which adopt Shakespeare's play for a different

genre, retaining virtually the entire plot but not Shakespeare's language? Were it not for the tendency to spin Shakespeare's play in the direction of a 'happy ending', many of the early *Romeo and Juliet*-inspired westerns and gangster films, such as *To the Last Man* and *The Guilty Generation*, respectively, would rank as adaptations. Other important productions – those that mark important junctures in the film history or, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, technological innovation – are worthy of mention. The 1937 film *Ambikapathy* is one of the earliest-known South Asian period films. Set in 1083, the film features the a forbidden love affair between Ambikapathy, the son of a great poet, and the princess Amaravathy; naturally, the princess's father does not approve of her pauper-poet and devises a test for Ambikapathy, which he fails, losing the princess's hand in marriage as a consequence. Allegedly, in the syncretistic tradition of South Asian cinema, the film contains a balcony scene that recalls Cukor's 1936 production. If *Ambikapathy* is of historical significance, then the 1953 spinoff, *Beneath the 12-Mille Reef*, is important for its stunning use of underwater photography – something that Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* takes for theme. Essentially, the son (Tony) and daughter (Gwyneth) of rival sponge-fishermen develop an unlikely romance when one family invades the other's fishing 'turf'. In a deviation from Shakespeare's plot, it is Tony's father, Mike – not Mercutio – who is killed in an accident; Arnold, the Paris figure, proceeds to burn Mike's boat and steals his cargo. Hence, in order to recover his father's barely-afloat business, Tony, along with Gwyneth, takes a boat from Arnold's team and sets out to go sponge-fishing along the deadly 12-Mille Reef. When Thomas and Arnold apprehend the lovers, Arnold and Tony fight and, in the process, Thomas is persuaded to grant Tony permission to marry his daughter. This spinoff thus offers a happy ending, tempered by Mike's tragedy.

What is lacking in the above films, despite offering faithful transpositions of the major themes and plot of *Romeo and Juliet*, is a profound sense of the *tragic inevitability* that fuels Shakespeare's play. This, as we shall see, is what distinguishes a truly Shakespearean version of *Romeo and Juliet* from the hundreds of 'wannabes' that seek access to the play's affective capital. Rival social structures always inform this tragic trajectory - typically, those pertaining to class, race, and/or religion; interestingly, those spinoffs that tackle race and/or religion, rather than those revolving around class differences, tend to occupy the border between spinoff and adaptation. Tragic inevitability and the inscrutable workings of Karma are the subject of the epic *Romeo and Juliet* spinoff *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak (From Judgement Day to Judgement Day)*. In this 1988 South Asian film, Shakespeare's plot is adhered to quite extensively: caught in an ancient rivalry, Raj falls in love (at first sight) with Rashmi, despite her betrothal to another. Raj's love deepens when he goes (undetected) to a party thrown by Rashmi's father Thakur, as Raj risks life and limb just to see her face. When the two families wind up vacationing in the same location, Raj and Rashmi officially fall deeply in love. Thakur, outraged, seeks to speed up his daughter's marriage to his chosen suitor, Roop, and it is immediately after the 'engagement' party that Raj and Rashmi elope, fleeing to a dilapidated temple in the country (significantly, the depiction of 'Mantua' as a ruinous borderland or liminal space has become a commonplace in *Romeo and Juliet* films). However, the doomed lovers are hunted down by Thakur's hired men and, in the midst of an effort to kill Raj, Rashmi is murdered in a move that cleverly conflates Mercutio and Juliet's character. When Raj sees that his best friend/lover is dead, he prevents his own murder by killing himself with a dagger, echoing Juliet's manner of suicide in Shakespeare's play. As Doug Lanier astutely observes, '(t)he tragic

fatedness of the lovers is signaled early on when Rashmi takes photographs of Raj during a sunset, an omen of death; the final shot of the dead lovers, sunset in the background, recalls this motif'.¹⁵

This inescapable sense of ill-fatedness – of being star crossed – is the defining feature that separates a spinoff from an adaptation. Indeed, long before it was a play by William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet was a legend – a genre which, as Linda Charnes has argued, is nothing if not haunted – engendering the desire to 'escap(e) prior encoding'; legends, in other words, confront their protagonists with the paradox of their belated arrival at the very scene of the stories they presume to animate and originate.¹⁶ As I have argued elsewhere, Shakespeare's play actively struggles against the forces of the legendary, as evidenced in Romeo and Juliet's desire to be 'new baptized' at all costs (2.1.93).¹⁷ We see the influence of the legend – and its peculiar history of literary, rather than oral transmission – appear in *Romeo and Juliet's* many references to the constraints posed by books, letters, and acts of writing; although Romeo and Juliet appear convinced that they can become the 'authors' of their own destiny, it is the *auctoritas* – the preexisting authority – of the legend that thwarts their efforts to divorce their bodies from the tragic referentiality of their names.¹⁸

¹⁵ Lanier, p. 285.

¹⁶ Linda Charnes, *Notorious Identity: Materializing the Subject in Shakespeare* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 99.


¹⁷ Courtney Lehmann, 'Strictly Shakespeare? Dead Letters, Ghostly Fathers, and the Cultural Pathology of Authorship in Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*: Vol. 52.2 (Summer 2001): pp. 189–221.

¹⁸ For an extensive reading of the play in these terms, see Courtney Lehmann, *Shakespeare Remains: Theater to Film, Early Modern to Postmodern* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), especially Chapter One, 'Shakespeare Unauthorized: Tragedy "by the book" in *Romeo and Juliet*', pp. 25–53.

There is no better example of the encroachment of the legend on Romeo and Juliet's best-laid plans than Juliet's inscription of its *auctoritas* in her commonplace book which, naturally, contains 'sententious' quotations from other sources, including an alliterative comparison of Romeo with 'rosemary' (2.3.195) - nothing less than the herb sprinkled on the bodies of the dead. In other words, no matter what fate they desire or attempt to authorise, Romeo and Juliet are destined to die by the cultural weight - the historically entrenched *auctoritas* - of the legend, which bears down upon Shakespeare's play even, it seems, against the playwright's own wishes. Hence, no film of *Romeo and Juliet* can crossover from a spinoff to an adaptation without some representation of this tragic inevitability, which must be implied or produced through foreshadowing techniques (such as the sunset in Mansoor Khan's film) or allusions to the lovers' distinctly 'star-crossed' fate (Romeo and Juliet embody clashing faiths, social classes, races, or ethnic groups). As we shall see, Baz Luhrmann's adaptation goes one step further, alluding to Romeo and Juliet's tragic predestination through the narrative front-loading of lines like Romeo's statement after he consumes the poison ('th(e) drugs are quick') as well as through scenes that actually flash forward to the death of the lovers.

There are several more spinoffs that are of interest for their conceptual genius, such as the Nepalese-themed saga *1942: A Love Story*, along with *Dakan* (Mohamed Camara 1997), the first African film to feature a homosexual relationship between the 'Romeo' and 'Juliet' characters. Additionally, *This is the Sea* resituates the *Romeo and Juliet* legend amidst sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, while *Solomon and Gaenor*, which is set in Wales in 1911, features a forbidden relationship between a Jewish salesman and a Welsh miner's daughter. Only the soundtrack, which contains recitations of rabbinical liturgy and Welsh

lamentation, creates the harmony that is impossible for the doomed lovers. The final borderline adaptation that I will point to here is, in the tradition of the lesser-known films cited above, a politically daring version of *Romeo and Juliet*, titled *Torn Apart* (Jack Fisher and Barry Markowitz 1989). This film tells the story of childhood friends Ben Arnon and Laila Malek; Ben and Laila find themselves reunited in Israel when Ben is performing his obligatory service to the Israeli Army. The problem is that Laila is Palestinian, and, naturally, their respective families are violently against the match. Moreover, a fellow Palestinian, Moustapha (the Paris figure), actively pursues his hope of marrying Laila, while Laila's relative Fawzi (the Tybalt character) is engaged in anti-Israeli terrorism. Professor Mansour, similar to Friar Laurence, is Ben's only mentor and ally; though he will sacrifice his own life to assist the lovers in their forbidden relations, Professor Mansour also serves as a variation on the Chorus in *Romeo and Juliet*, as the character who explains the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. With so much stacked against them, Ben and Laila try to flee to New York City, but are apprehended by soldiers. Upon their return with the captives, the soldiers get involved in a funeral riot and, as Laila tries to save Ben from harm, she is killed by a single gunshot, collapsing into Ben's embrace. The key to considering this film as more of an adaptation than a spinoff is, once again, the very real tragic inevitability that continues to loom over the Gaza strip today. And, as Doug Lanier points out, nothing in the film escapes complicity in the ongoing antagonisms between Jews and Muslims – not even the building blocks of cinematic narration – for although '(r)epeated wide shots of the land remind the viewer (t)hat the war is over', the 'soundtrack contains continual reminders of the conflict'.¹⁹ It is a testament to the power

 ¹⁹ Lanier, p. 287.

of the Romeo and Juliet legend that it has been brought to bear on history itself and, yet, cannot change the tragic course of modern times.

Issues for adaptation

- **The setting:** *Romeo and Juliet* has proven to be the most 'adaptable' play in terms of its setting – as we have seen in this chapter, the sky's the limit (cats?). But since setting doesn't guarantee a given film's success, how do a director and screenwriter choose a setting for which the legendary, predetermined nature of the lovers' tragedy becomes believable – or, better yet – inevitable?
- **The principals:** even more than setting, casting the proper leads is the single-most important decision that is made in adapting *Romeo and Juliet* for the screen. How do a casting director and filmmaker choose *believable* young actors who are mature enough to handle the demanding roles?
- **The balcony scene:** among the more than thirty adaptations and two-hundred and thirty identified spinoffs and/or citations of *Romeo and Juliet*, the most referenced tableau is invariably the balcony scene. Clichéd to a fault, the balcony scene presents a unique challenge for filmmakers, who must inflect it with enough originality and immediacy to convince the audience that what they are seeing is real as opposed to 'staged'. What does a director have to do to insure that the balcony scene is not merely cinematic but more importantly, cinematographic, or, a visually meaningful threshold event in the young lovers' lives?
- **Image versus word:** for adaptations or transpositions similar to *West Side Story*, which does not retain a single line of the play, how are the film's 'Shakespearean' qualities rendered? How

do a director and cinematographer rise to the challenge of creating a 'rhetoric' of images that is capable of replacing Shakespeare's poetry? Is it necessary to privilege one language over the other?

- **The soundtrack:** long before Baz Luhrmann's 'MTV'-style *Romeo + Juliet* was released, music and dance played a significant role in shaping the story – particularly noticeably during the Capulet Ball – of the two ill-fated lovers. The success of *West Side Story* has overshadowed many of the contributions of subsequent soundtracks, composers, and choreographers which (with the exception of Franco Zeffirelli's and Baz Luhrmann's adaptations), have gone largely ignored. How do a director, composer, and choreographer create music and dance numbers that can stand on their own, as they do in all three of these films?
- **Foreshadowing:** how does a director create the all-important sense of tragic inevitability for the audience while sustaining the belief that somehow, Romeo and Juliet will cheat death?