

## ADAPTING SHAKESPEARE FROM PAGE TO SCREEN: A CLOSE-UP OF FRANCO ZEFFIRELLI'S *ROMEO AND JULIET*

The present paper examines the dynamic adaptation of Shakespeare's language for the screen, focusing on the way in which the camera, or the invisible "eye" of the director, rather than the preservation of the written text, transforms our reading of the narrative. Shakespeare wrote «All the world's a stage,» and contemporary film adaptations seem to epitomize this metaphor by disseminating and translating the aesthetic qualities of Shakespeare's language into the more universal language of film. This paper illuminates the technicalities and practicalities of adaptation by analysing representative scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* through the perception of Franco Zeffirelli. Nowadays, film directors use a visual language and sound to go to the very core of Shakespeare's plays, transforming yet continuing his legacy in the modern era. Accordingly, many directors see it as part of their job to decide how much of Shakespeare's language they exclude or include in order to give the audiences their own view of Shakespeare's plays. Within this conceptual frame, I shall analyse two *Romeo and Juliet* scenes, which have been adapted for this film, revealing the way in which adaptations of Shakespeare's text both expand and diminish their source. The purpose of this paper is to invite the reader of Shakespeare's dramatic texts to analyse his language from different angles, from the "camera's" perspective, and to offer a complex picture of the role of the director in film adaptations as translations.

### 1. Introduction

Even if Shakespeare's plays were mainly written for the stage, today, many people have their first encounter with his stories through film. The question this article debates is in what manner does the version of the story, seen and adapted for screen, relate to the version produced for the stage? When it comes to Shakespeare's film adaptations, there have

been many voices that sustain that this process involves a lowering of the status of the original play's significance, assuming that adapters undermine it and sometimes only simplify the source text.

In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon claims that «if an adaptation is perceived as 'lowering' a story (according to some imagined hierarchy of medium or genre) the response is likely to be negative» and this makes the readership think that «authors and texts such as Shakespeare are on a classical pedestal and cannot be touched or reproduced, unless it is by a higher art form»<sup>1</sup>. Hutcheon adds that «it seems more or less acceptable to adapt *Romeo and Juliet* into a respected high art form, like an opera or a ballet, but not to make it into a movie»<sup>2</sup>.

On the same line, when asked about his adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, Zeffirelli said that: «I have always felt sure I could break the myth that Shakespeare on stage and screen is only an exercise for the intellectual. I want his plays to be enjoyed by ordinary people»<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, Boose comments that «in a sense Shakespeare himself was not only a popular artist, but also a populariser. For a largely less literary audience, he transferred from page to stage and from narrative to drama some of the central writings of his time»<sup>4</sup>. Likewise, throughout his own lifetime, Shakespeare was for the common people and might be thought to perform merely for the distraction of the masses. In addition, Rothwell claims that the film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays «have served several purposes»<sup>5</sup>. In accordance, Jackson sustains that the purpose of «proving the relevance of the Bard to our times [is in] manifesting the ability of the cinema to cope with works originally written for the Elizabethan theatre and obtaining what Bourdieu called 'cultural capital'»<sup>6</sup>.

In fact, Toury considers «the editing process as the most determinant cinematographic tool in interpreting Shakespeare»<sup>7</sup>. In theatre the

1 LINDA HUTCHEON, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Routledge, Abingdon 2006, 3.

2 Ibid.

3 LYNDY BOOSE and RICHARD BURT, *Shakespeare the Movie popularizing the plays on film, TV and video* Routledge, London 1997, 81.

4 Ibid.

5 KENNETH ROTHWELL, *Shakespeare in Silence: From Page to Screen. A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, 1-27.

6 RUSSELL JACKSON, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, 93.

7 GIDEON TOURY, *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* John Benjamins, Amsterdam 1995, 7.

dialogue is the action itself, in a sense, while in film meaning is created through the language of images, with the director not relying so much on the contribution of words for their meaning-making function. In his writing, Shakespeare's action was concentrated in speeches and in gestures, while film has the perspective of lighting, «colour, texture, shapes and lines organized within frames and their juxtapositions, which ... compose a complex visual field»<sup>8</sup>.

## 2. Methodological Scenery

From its earliest days, cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare's plays have been a significant part of the history of cinema and the volume of research dealing with these adaptations for the screen is enormous and still growing. Cinema presents Shakespeare plays with a completely different dynamic. It offers different forms of identification than the ones offered by the stage. Additional perspectives, angles, shots, stillness and movement, through camera work, as well as «diverse settings and locations, sound, and colours, images, and textures are join[ed] together to create «endless permutations»<sup>9</sup>, as Holmes claims.

Combining the relations between theatre and cinema, adaptations of Shakespeare's plays in a case study analysis results in a framework for debating questions like: what choices does the director make for *Romeo and Juliet* film adaptation in order to sustain the message from the play and what is lost in the process? Which are the discrepancies between Shakespeare's text for screen adaptation and the one actually written for the stage and what effect do they have on the reader/viewer?

At the level of methodological scenery, this paper embraces several research methods based primarily on procedures of investigation, linguistic observation, qualitative and quantitative research about accommodating Shakespeare's language for the stage and adapting and so translating it to the language of film.

Contrastive textual analysis and the evaluation of Shakespeare's language are used to specific scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*, such as Act I scene v, the murder of Paris and a scene composed of Juliet's monologues. As an anticipated result from the analysis, this case study will re-

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<sup>8</sup> TOURY, 7.

<sup>9</sup> JAMES HOLMES, *The Name and Nature of Translation Studies. Translated! Papers on Translation and Translation Studies*, Rodopi, Amsterdam 1972, 67-80.

veal the different ways in which Shakespeare and Zeffirelli decide to tell these parts of the story.

Looking through various screen cuts from the film, the findings will expose what is lost and what is preserved from Shakespeare's language in the editing process of screen adaptation. Also, this part of the research will show in what way the different perspective of this procedure of "cutting" the text and inserting other media affects the message of Shakespeare's play.

### 3. What's in a "song"?

In Act I, scene v, in which Romeo and Juliet meet for the first time, Zeffirelli chooses to use dance and song for the first encounter of the two lovers by inserting traditional Italian dance, the *moresca* and Nino Rota's love-themed song, which is evocative of the historical period when *Romeo and Juliet* was originally performed.

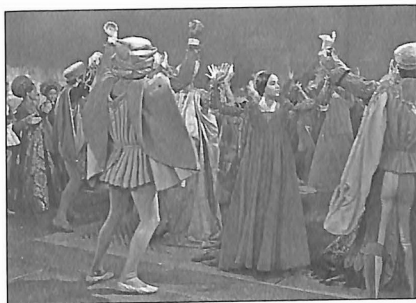


FIGURE 1: Juliet doing the Moresca dance in *Romeo and Juliet* film by Franco Zeffirelli in 1968. Pinterest. Accessed on May 12, 2020. <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/352266002080880764>

The dance in the early modern period would have been similar to the ballroom atmosphere that was staged in the 1590s. The song is performed by a troubadour character as part of the *diegesis* throughout the Capulets ball. In this visually and auditorily challenging atmosphere, Zeffirelli chooses to present the first temporal and spatial encounter of the two future lovers. The lyrics of the song complete the scene, making up for the loss of certain written scenes of the play, enhancing the meaning of the Shakespearean words by compressing them in music:

What is a youth? / Impetuous fire. / What is a maid? / Ice and desire. / The world wags on / A rose will bloom, / It then will fade / So does a youth. / So does the fairest maid. / Comes a time when one sweet smile / Has its season for awhile / Then Love's in love with me / Some may think only to marry. / Others will tease and tarry. / Mine is the very best parry, / Cupid he rules us all. / Caper the caper; sing me the song / Death will come soon to hush us along / Sweeter than honey and bitter as gall, / Love is a pastime that never will pall. / Sweeter than honey and bitter as gall, / Cupid he rules us all. / A rose will bloom, it then will fade. / So does a youth. / So does the fairest maid<sup>10</sup>.

The scene, which opens with the dance *moresca* «involv[s] a dizzying interweaving of hands, gazes and bodies»<sup>11</sup>, and, thereby, becomes a dance ritual in which the feelings of Romeo and Juliet are gently interpreted by the director in a way that is less formal than the song scene. Here, the youthful actors (Olivia Hussey remarkably in the role of Juliet and Leonard Whiting as Romeo) once again create a notable intensity. Zeffirelli use their faces which appear juvenile and innocent for the close-ups, transmitting what Shakespeare wanted to deliver with the text: «a pair of star-crossed lovers»<sup>12</sup>.

In most cases, the written text of a play has different variations from any film adaptation. The written texts of any play contain stage directions that serve as a guide for the reader. Although stage directions in the text of a play tend to give the reader a clearer and better understanding of the setting, they can also be interruptive for the reader. For example, «(*Romeo sees Juliet/Enter Romeo and Juliet above, at the window*)»<sup>13</sup>.

10 Cinema Italiano: Music of Ennio Morricone & Nino Rota Album. Lyrics.com. STANDS4 LLC, 2019. Accessed 26 September. 2019. <<https://www.lyrics.com/album/27065>>.

11 COURTNEY LEHMANN, *Screen Adaptations Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet: The relationship between text and film*, A&C Black Publishers Limited, London 2010, 34-173.

12 WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, et al. *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*. London, Arden Shakespeare, London 2011, 456.

13 SHAKESPEARE, *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*. London, Arden Shakespeare, London 2001, 458.



FIGURE 2: Leonard Whiting, Olivia Hussey in *Romeo and Juliet* film by Franco Zeffirelli in 1968. Amazon. Accessed on May 12, 2020.  
<https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/51KEJAS5ABL.jpg>

As long as the plot of the play advances, the reader gets more involved in reading the play, the endless need to read the stage directions has a disruptive effect on the reader's interaction with the play. In this case of film adaptation by Zeffirelli stage direction are eliminated and the reader becomes the viewer, ready to enjoy an uninterrupted disclosure of the plot from start to end. In this film version from 1968, the director has removed, re-created or altered, several scenes in order to design a full coverage of the story, condensing the play's narrative to a few hours of continuous watching. In Shakespeare's play, for instance, when Paris confronts Romeo outside the tomb, he executes Paris in the very last scene iii, Act V: "Oh, I am slain! If thou be merciful, Open the tomb. Lay me with Juliet. (Paris dies)". However, the film version does not adapt this part of the play in particular. Moreover, the entire scene iii



from Act V of the play is visibly missing in the film adaptation. The murder of Paris casts Romeo in a bad light and may deny him the empathy of the viewer. Thus, the film neglects this act of murder so in this way Romeo may gain the full viewer's sympathy.

Some other parts from the play have been altered in the film. For example, the series of actions in which Juliet swallows the sleeping potion given by Friar Lawrence, in the play version, is conveyed by Juliet's long monologue before taking the sleeping potion, in this way she also communicates her love for Romeo, and her fears and her hopes to the audience:

Come, night; come, Romeo; come, thou day in night;  
For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night  
Whiter than new snow on a raven's back  
/Come, gentle night, come, loving, black-brow'd night,  
Give me my Romeo; and, when he shall die,  
Take him and cut him out in little stars,  
And he will make the face of heaven so fin  
/That all the world will be in love with night  
And pay no worship to the garish sun.  
O, I have bought the mansion of a love,  
But not possess'd it, and, though I am sold,  
Not yet enjoy'd: so tedious is this day  
As is the night before some festival  
To an impatient child that hath new robes  
And may not wear them<sup>14</sup>. (3.2.1-31)

Additionally, what Juliet actually says adds new levels to the play. The film adaptation loses lines and, in this way, does not show the viewer who Juliet really is a passionate woman who comprehends the amusing irrationality of her situation. Not «an impatient child that hath new robes»<sup>15</sup>. Yet, in the film adaptation, Zeffirelli chooses to present Juliet as simply swallowing the sleeping potion without many details, just simply pleading for strength in love before taking the potion.

In opposition to the text of the play, in the film adaptation, Zeffirelli reduces Juliet's monologue, allowing the audience to consider a few key points: first, the need for a long speech earlier in the scene may

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<sup>14</sup> SHAKESPEARE, 508.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

have seemed pointless when you have the visual aid of film and camera work. Secondly, the single sentence Juliet does offer becomes, through its starkness, very powerful and memorable. Shortening the scene by cutting the lines and just presenting Juliet asking for strength in the image of love is more intense, and the emotional connection with the actor, from the viewer's perspective, is increased.

#### 4. Conclusions

In conclusion, Zeffirelli's adaptation not only gives visual and auditory explanations to the story of Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* and to the characters' actions, but it also forges a bond, an intimate connection of the viewer and the characters. The adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* for the screen reveals Zeffirelli to be an innovative director who could revitalise the qualities that originally made the plays popular and who could bring to new audiences the intimacy and endless validity of such a story.

ALEXANDRA ȘTEFANIA ȚIULESCU  
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## Ամփոփում

ԹՈՒՂԹԷՆ ՊԱՍՏԱՌ  
ՇԷՅՔԱՓԻՐԻ ՊԱՏՇԱՃԵՑՈՒՄ ՄՕՏԷՆ ԱԿՆԱՐԿ ՄԸ  
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## ԱԼԵՔՍԱՆՏՐԱ ՇՏԵՖԱՆԻԱ ՑԻՈՒԼԵՍՔՈՒ

Այս յօդուածին մէջ, Ալեքսանդրա Ստեֆանիան կը քննարկէ Շէյքսպիրի լեզուին պատշաճեցումը շարժապատկերի պատառին համար, յատուկ ուշադրութիւն դարձնելով շարժանկարի մեքենային գործօնին, այսինքն՝ բեմադրիչի անտեսանելի «աչք»ին, աւելի քան գրութեան հարազատութեան, որ կը ձեւաւորէ պատմութեան մեր մեկնաբանութիւնը:

Շէյքսպիրը գրած է, «Ամբողջ աշխարհը բեմ է». իրօք, այժմէական ժապաւէնի պատշաճեցման գործերը այս փոխաբերութեան ճշմարտութիւնը կը խորհրդանշեն:

Թարգմանելով Շէյքսպիրի լեզուի գեղագիտական յատկութիւնները շարժապատկերի աւելի տիեզերական լեզուին, հեղինակը կը լուսաբանէ պատշաճեցման աշխատանքի գիտարուեստական եւ գործնական կողմերը, ուսումնասիրելով Ռոմէոյ եւ Ճուլիէթի խորհրդանշական պատկերները Ֆրանքոյ Մէֆֆիրելլիի դիտանկիւնէն: