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Author(s): Jennifer L. Martin

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Tights vs. Tattoos: Filmic Interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet*

JENNIFER L. MARTIN

Francisco Zeffirelli and Baz Luhrmann present very different interpretations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* that imply how these directors see the world and what they value. After reading the primary text, students can sharpen their critical thinking skills by comparing the two films in terms of particular scenes, directorial intention, *mis-en-scène*, etc., as Shakespeare scholar and film critic H. R. Coursen suggests. The result of this line of thinking is that there is no one "correct" version: "In other words, actors and directors collaborate with the original work" (3).

When students are encouraged to view film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays in this light, they will inevitably view them more critically. A valuable technique that Coursen suggests is for students to view the same scene from a variety of film adaptations. He notes, "Comparing and contrasting the same scene in two or more versions of the same script teaches the student to look for detail" (5). Students will also begin to notice the actors' and directors' interpretations of Shakespearean text and the fact that these interpretations differ vastly from film to film, a realization that will encourage them to take more ownership of the text. Teaching students to be more critical of media sources will help them to view film/television as a text that can be deconstructed. As Coursen suggests, "Instead of merely seating students in front of the tube, we can unashamedly make what appears there the focus of study. If we help students to understand the media, we empower them" (8). In order to do this, however, we must begin to look at film critically and develop a vocabulary through which to discuss the nuances of film art.

Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 version and Baz Luhrmann's 1996 version of *Romeo and Juliet* present very different filmic approaches to the play

and vastly different ideas about the two young lovers and their relationship to the world and each other. Zeffirelli's film casts two very young and virtually unknown actors, Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey, in the roles of Romeo and Juliet. The director's vision of adolescent love is one of immediacy and immaturity. The young lovers, particularly Romeo, act impulsively and are naive pawns in a deterministic world. Zeffirelli's view of adolescence is one of impertinence and naiveté. His film is melodramatic and linear, highlighting the role of fate and the sense that the story of Romeo and Juliet could not have ended any differently. Luhrmann's interpretation of Shakespeare's text, on the other hand, pays homage not only to the primary source, but also to filmic versions that came before. However, Luhrmann's depiction of the two young lovers, Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes, marks a definitive departure from Zeffirelli's in that his two lovers are more grounded and reflective and show more of an inner maturity and strength of character; his depiction of adolescence through these two characters is more worldly. Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* makes much use of flashback and flashforward to add to the drama of the script. His style suggests irony and downplays the role of fate in the story.

Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*: Fate and Naiveté

Zeffirelli's version begins with the prologue dubbed in as a voiceover, signifying the omnipotent role that fate plays in the lives of the two young lovers. We are then quickly led into the scene of battle between the Capulets and Montagues. This fray is not glamorized. On the contrary, it seems to affect the entire village. As David Kranz states, "Zeffirelli uses close-ups in the opening brawl of his *Romeo and Juliet* (1.1) to underscore the violence of the action and possibly to relate this destructive passion to the upcoming love of Romeo and Juliet, which is similarly photographed" (347). We are soon shown the scene when Paris asks Capulet for his only daughter (1.2). When Capulet responds to Paris's comment, "Younger than she are happy mothers made" (216) with "And too soon marred are those so early made," (13) he notices Lady Capulet through a window, and she gives him an evil glare as if to validate his statement. This is an interesting difference from Shakespeare's primary text—a difference that alludes to the often-dismaying situation women are placed in regarding the business of marriage. Another interesting difference from Shakespeare's primary text is Zeffirelli's implication that physical love exists between Lady Capulet and Tybalt. This insinuation is made explicit in Lady Capulet's plea for justice after Tybalt's death (3.1).

In Zeffirelli's interpretation of the Capulet feast (1.5), Rosaline is depicted—a difference from Luhrmann's version—and Romeo is focused on her until he sees Juliet. His immediate transference of affection demonstrates his emotional immaturity and his need for immediacy in matters of love. Romeo and Juliet seek each other out with their eyes, and Zeffirelli makes much use of the close-up. As Kranz states:

Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* uses numerous close-ups on the young lovers to help us feel their passion and side

with them against Veronese society. This is especially evident in Act 1, Scene 5, the Capulet ball, where juxtaposed close-ups of Romeo and Juliet are interspersed with medium and full shots during an elaborate Renaissance dance. (347)

The focus on the eyes of the two lovers illustrates their innocence, inexperience, and naiveté.

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The balcony scene (2.2) in Zeffirelli's version focuses on the physical attraction the two lovers have for one another. Zeffirelli makes much of the fact that the two lovers share an intense *physical* passion. During the marriage ceremony (2.6), Friar Lawrence has to physically keep the two apart, for they cannot keep their hands off each other; they



The balcony scene from Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* starring Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey.

are impulsive and seek immediate gratification. When Romeo learns of his banishment and Juliet of her inability to avoid the arranged marriage to Paris, the two are desperate and hysterical. The Friar acts as the calming, paternal figure for them both.

Zeffirelli's interpretation of the conflict between Tybalt and Mercutio (3.1) is one of playful bantering; the two seem to enjoy joking with one another and to share a mutual admiration and respect. Tybalt looks absolutely dismayed when he realizes that he has wounded Mercutio, a sense of regret that is absent from Luhrmann's version. In the film, it is Romeo's impulsiveness that has caused this death.

When in Friar Lawrence's cell after killing Tybalt (3.3), Romeo's grief manifests itself as whiney and immature. Friar Lawrence strikes him and is represented as an authority figure. Romeo is shown here as an impulsive youth, unable to control himself. Zeffirelli here depicts adolescence as an emotional, impulsive time; wiser, adult forces must contain adolescent desires.

At the Capulet tomb where Juliet is to be buried, Friar Lawrence smiles and then remembers himself, as he presides over the ceremony. We are given the sense that the Friar's intervention will triumph. However, his paternalism soon turns to cowardliness in the film. The Friar's line, "I dare no longer stay," is repeated several times, suggesting his fear; likewise, he is not given the chance to explain the events that lead to the two deaths, as he is in the primary text. Romeo and Juliet are carried out together on a platform, dressed in their wedding clothes, as if to signify their idealization. The Prince's last lines, "A glooming peace this morning with it brings. / The sun for sorrow will not show its head. / Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things; / Some shall be pardoned, and some punished; / For never was a story of more woe / Than this of Juliet and her Romeo" (306–11) are dubbed in a voiceover as Lord Capulet and Lord Montague walk out together, followed by Lady Capulet, Lady Montague, and the others, truly signifying the resolution of the strife between the two families.

Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet*: Postmodern Montage

Luhrmann's interpretation begins with a television newscaster reading the prologue, which is then repeated in both voice and text as we are introduced to the setting, Verona Beach, and the cast of char-

acters. Capulet and Montague are CEOs of corporations. Luhrmann's interpretation of the play is postmodern in that it pays homage to other Shakespearean works (e.g., a store on the beach is named "The Merchant of Verona Beach," a run-down theater in town is named "The Globe," and the name for the local cleaners is "Out, Out Damn Spot Cleaners") and to other film adaptations of the play. For example, Luhrmann takes Zeffirelli's incestuous overtones between Lady Capulet and Tybalt and makes them more explicit. According to Levenson:

Luhrmann's revision also reflects its era, perhaps most specifically, in its postmodern style: it echoes key figures in film history, from Busby Berkeley to Federico Fellini to Ken Russell; it uses techniques and images familiar from television networks (MTV) and genres (evening news, *Miami Vice*). At times it even looks back to strategies originating with Garrick, such as the encounter of Romeo and Juliet in the tomb. (122–23)

A striking difference in Luhrmann's version is his use of religious imagery. The Priest (Friar Lawrence in Shakespeare's primary text) has a tattoo of a cross on his back, religious statues loom ominously over the action, and Juliet's room contains scores of angels and a shrine to the Virgin Mary. Although the society depicted in this version is fast-paced and violent, perhaps the religious imagery illustrates the spiritual aspect of the love between Romeo and Juliet. The love between DiCaprio's Romeo and Danes's Juliet is strikingly more tender and not so violently immediate and physical as that depicted in Zeffirelli's version. Simultaneously, Luhrmann's use of religious imagery also suggests that religious dictates represented by the preponderance of religious icons are inadequate in explaining the confusion of postmodern life.

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Juliet (Claire Danes) dressed as an angel for the costume ball in Luhrmann's film.

The society Luhrmann depicts is more violent. The initial brawl between the Capulets and Montagues results in the blowing up of a gas station. Tybalt is depicted as being more violent and more menacing in this version. For example, in the first scene of battle, he draws his gun on a young boy and says "bang." Luhrmann does much to demonize the majority of the Capulet family. At the Capulet feast, Tybalt is dressed as a devil and is shown growling; the Capulet boys are dressed as skeletons. Lord Capulet strikes Lady Capulet in Act 3, Scene 5 when Juliet refuses to marry Dave (Paris). Also, Lady Capulet is depicted in an evil light. Although she was married at a young age, not only does she not sympathize with her daughter (as the primary text indicates), but she is also cruel and cold to her and takes an active role in the plotting of the marriage. Luhrmann depicts Lady Capulet as possessing power "behind the scenes." Furthermore, she is represented not as a mother, but as a licentious woman, a depiction that may be an allusion to Lady Capulet's "dirty look" to Lord Capulet in Zeffirelli's earlier version, mentioned previously. Finally, in Act 3, Scene 1, after the death of Tybalt, Luhrmann takes Capulet's stoic lines from the primary text: "Not Romeo prince; he was Mercutio's

friend; / His fault concludes but what the law should end, / The life of Tybalt" (186–88) and gives them to Montague. Perhaps Luhrmann's purpose in demonizing the Capulets is to highlight Juliet's goodness and innocence, which leads to her acceptance of a man of the Montague clan.

Another interesting difference in Luhrmann's version of the Capulet feast is that Romeo takes drugs, offered to him by Mercutio.

Romeo and Benvolio learn of the Capulet feast via television. In Zeffirelli's version, some attendees of the feast are masked, but in Luhrmann's version it is a costume ball. The Montague boys are dressed humorously—Mercutio as a drag queen, others as Vikings, in kilts, etc. Luhrmann's costuming of Romeo and Juliet illuminates his projection of their personalities. Juliet is dressed as an angel, illustrating her innocence and purity. This choice of costume echoes other filmic depictions of Juliet, including Zeffirelli's. However, Claire Danes's Juliet is not so naive as the Juliet of Olivia Hussey. As Gerrie Lim states, "Here's a Juliet who walks that fine line between the naiveté of youth and the passion of someone much wiser than her age would allow" (2). Romeo is dressed as a soldier, with a chain mail suit, and he is more "warlike" in this version. He is not the weeping innocent shown by Zeffirelli. He shows more strength and is more reflective upon his actions. For example, in Act 3, Scene 1, when Romeo kills Tybalt, the camera pauses on his face for a long close-up in which we see a sense of bewilderment, regret, and disillusionment. This emotion is reinforced in Act 3, Scene 5, when Romeo is awakened from his first and only slumber with Juliet by a flashback of the murder he has committed. He yells the line, "I am fortune's fool," (138) while looking up at a religious statue that is under construction. Luhrmann's ironic use of *mis-en-scène* here seems to suggest that fortune does not play as great a role in the lives of his characters as it does in other versions. Also, his depiction of creation under con-

struction illustrates the self-consciousness of his own creation (the film) via his use of textual and filmic allusion; his film is definitely a postmodern construction.

We first encounter Juliet in slow motion, while she is submerged in water; Juliet is portrayed as peaceful and innocent. In contrast, the Nurse's and Lady Capulet's movements are sped up while they search for Juliet. With this technique Luhrmann seems to be poking fun at these characters, demonstrating their ridiculousness and frivolity. In fact, Luhrmann depicts Lady Capulet as possessing more power and influence than does Zeffirelli. She is shown flirting and conspiring with Dave (Paris) in this film version. She is also depicted as being a more angry and corrupt character. She kisses Tybalt openly. Her affection for him is much more explicit than in the Zeffirelli version. For example, in Act 3, Scene 1, Lady Capulet clings to the body of Tybalt after he is slain, and she attempts to attack Benvolio when he explains the events in question. In Act 3, Scene 4, when Capulet explains to Paris why he cannot woo Juliet, as she is distraught over the death of Tybalt, Luhrmann gives one of Capulet's lines to Lady Capulet. When Capulet states, "She loved her kinsman Tybalt dearly," (3) it is Lady Capulet who replies, "And so did I" (4).

Another interesting difference in Luhrmann's version of the Capulet feast is that Romeo takes drugs, offered to him by Mercutio. As he begins to hallucinate at the feast, he speaks the line from Act 5, Scene 3: "Thy drugs are quick" (120). Just prior to his taking the drug, he envisions his own death; Luhrmann inserts a flashforward sequence of Romeo entering the Capulet tomb, "well-neoned" with crosses.

Relevant Scenes for Classroom Interpretation

There are many scenes in these film versions of *Romeo and Juliet* that would be interesting to com-



Luhrmann's Romeo (Leonardo DiCaprio) entering the Capulet tomb.

pare and contrast in the classroom. The balcony scene in Act 2 is vastly different in the two versions. In Zeffirelli's version, Juliet contemplates her love on her balcony, and ample attention is paid to her breasts. This detail gives credence to the notion that Zeffirelli's version focuses highly on the physical aspects of the love between Romeo and Juliet. In Luhrmann's version, there is no balcony. Romeo and Juliet meet on equal footing. Juliet is not raised to a pedestal as is often depicted. She is shown walking around a pool and lamenting that Romeo is a Montague. When Romeo finally speaks to her, she screams, and the two fall into a pool. Luhrmann's use of water in his *mis-en-scène* is common when showing the two lovers. When Romeo and Juliet first spot each other at the Capulet feast, it is through an aquarium. The promise of their union is made in the pool, and Romeo falls into the pool after meeting Juliet on their one night together. This use of water suggests a purity, a spiritual component to their love, which is absent in Zeffirelli's version.

Another interesting scene to examine is Act 3, Scene 3, when Romeo is in Friar Lawrence's cell after learning that he has been banished. In Zeffirelli's version, as noted previously, Romeo is seen crying and wailing. He is on the floor and unable to maintain his composure or control his emotions. In Luhrmann's version, Romeo is not weeping and wailing in Friar Lawrence's cell, nor does the Friar (the Priest in Luhrmann's version) chastise him as if

he were a child. He is depicted as more of a friend or an equal than as a paternal figure.

A final scene worthy of analysis is that of the two lovers in the tomb—Act 5, Scene 3. In Zeffirelli's version, Romeo returns to Verona without being detected. There is also no interaction with Paris, as in the primary text, but Romeo does speak to the body of Tybalt, lying next to Juliet. In this version, Romeo dies before Juliet awakens. When Friar Lawrence leaves Juliet, after repeating "I dare no longer stay," (159) four times, she takes Romeo's dagger and quickly thrusts it into her chest. In Luhrmann's version, Romeo returns to Verona with police chasing him. What he says to Paris in the primary text, "tempt not a desp'rate man" (59), he shouts to the police, with his gun drawn. There are no Tybalt, no Paris, and no Priest in Luhrmann's version of the tomb scene, suggesting that his Romeo and Juliet are more isolated and alienated than are Zeffirelli's. Perhaps the major difference between the two films is that in Luhrmann's version Juliet awakens to see Romeo take the poison, and Romeo realizes his mistake. He is still alive when she kisses his lips to attempt to taste the poison. He then speaks to her, "Thus with a kiss I die" (120). Then there is silence. Claire Danes's Juliet then kills herself with a gun, but it is a more thoughtful and calculating death than the hasty and quick death of Olivia Hussey. We then see flashbacks of their loving union, as the two lie dead on top of one another in the funeral chamber, well lit with candles. The coroners then carry the bodies out. The two are not glorified in death and are not made to look attractive or idealized, as in Zeffirelli's version. Luhrmann's version ends with a television newscaster reading the Prince's last six lines, followed by the static of a TV screen. We do not see the overt resolution of the two families, as is made clear in Zeffirelli's version.

Classroom Applications

By providing students the vocabulary to discuss the genre of film, we can encourage them to look for detail and to analyze film in ways they never have before. It is important to teach students about film technique, at least in a rudimentary manner, so that they are able to more adequately understand directorial intention and view film as interpretative

text. Concepts such as flashback, flashforward, and *mis-en-scène* will be helpful in introducing students to the genre of film. It is not always necessary to show films in their entirety (for example, some teachers may want to avoid the brief nudity scene that occurs in Zeffirelli's version), although showing films from beginning to end will give students the full picture of what the director attempts to illustrate. Analyzing particular scenes from at least two Shakespearean film adaptations will provide students with the notion that there is more than one way to view a text. They may then discuss which versions they feel are truer to the primary text or truer to their personal interpretations of the primary text. Often it is difficult for students to understand that there may be various valid interpretations of a text. Bringing the genre of film to the teaching of Shakespeare in the classroom will encourage students to see the possibility of multiple interpretations and will perhaps provide them with more confidence in their own interpretive abilities.

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JENNIFER MARTIN teaches at Tinkham Alternative High School, Westland, Michigan.