

# William Shakespeare in Popular Culture

Explicit Sex in Three Adaptations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

Alexandra Joon 3833577

February 2014

BA Thesis English Language and Culture

Utrecht University

Supervisors:

Dr. P.C.J.M. Franssen

Prof. A.J. Hoenselaars

## Table of Contents

Preface	p. 3
1. Introduction	p. 4
2. Shakespeare: Aesthetically Refined, Timeless and Complex	p. 6
3. Shakespeare Porn	p. 10
4. Chapter 1: <i>Phileine Zegt Sorry</i> (2003)	p. 12
5. Chapter 2: <i>Tromeo and Juliet</i> (1999)	p. 17
6. Chapter 3: Franco Zeffirelli's <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (1968)	p. 23
7. Conclusion	p. 28
8. Works Consulted	p. 30

## Preface

In the last year of high school, I followed the course Cambridge English. One of our teachers taught English literature, which for the first six weeks was about Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. I was amazed by the double meanings and different themes within this one play and I fell in love with the Shakespearian language. Sometimes I wished people to speak in Shakespearian language and dreamed about how different a world that would be. I enjoy watching films, especially older films and I wanted to combine film and literature together in this research paper. I would like to thank my parents for brainstorming about this thesis during our holiday in South Africa and supporting me throughout these weeks of constantly improving myself. I also like to thank my supervisor Paul Franssen for his guidance, advice and providing me with new insights and sources that helped improve my work. I want to thank Sanne Wulf for checking and helping me put together the last details for this Bachelor Thesis.

## Introduction

William Shakespeare is regarded as one of the greatest poets and writers of Britain and has become a great part of British culture (Frye 20), serving as a symbol of culture. His name is associated with “quality, intelligence, expressiveness, urbanity, or ethical principles” (Lanier 7). His plays are often seen as “a trademark for time-tested quality and so it lends legitimacy to whatever it is associated with” (Lanier 9). In addition, Shakespeare is quoted and adapted extensively by different media and has an established position within popular culture. Douglas Lanier argues that it is important to study this relationship between Shakespeare and popular culture and, more specifically, the image popular culture assigns to Shakespeare (3). Lanier explains that popular culture puts Shakespeare partly on a pedestal and might offer scholars new insights on Shakespeare perception. On the other hand he cautions that many of these popular adaptations focus on what is “titillating, violent, anarchic, banal and silly” (Lanier 100), these being the very opposite of “principles of aesthetic and moral cultivation for which Shakespeare is symbol and vehicle” (Lanier 100).

Lanier admits that many observers, as he dubs them, disagree with his views. These ‘observers’ see Shakespeare “as the icon of high or ‘proper’ culture” (Lanier 3), which stands apart from popular culture. Whereas Lanier feels that Shakespeare adaptations can be done in popular culture, these observers feel that adapting Shakespeare’s works discredits his high cultural image. Lanier continues arguing that Shakespeare adaptations in popular culture are a valid source for Shakespeare studies (3), but he does not mention the effect of these adaptations on that high cultural image which concerns these observers. In light of this, the aim of this paper will be to determine the effect of popular culture adaptations on Shakespeare’s position as the Bard of England.

In order to construct a basis for comparison, first the parameters of Shakespeare's high cultural status must be defined, and an explanation must be offered as to what marks Shakespeare as "aesthetically refined, timeless, complex and intellectually challenging" (Lanier 3). With the scope of Shakespeare's cultural image being so large, this paper will focus on the analysis of three Shakespeare adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* that include explicit scenes of a salacious nature, in relation to this image.

Another theoretical framework is necessary in this respect, where the concept of sex-scenes in Shakespeare adaptations as treated by critics will be discussed. In this field, Richard Burt will prove to be a valid source. On the basis of the theories revolving around Shakespeare's high cultural image as presented by Lanier, and Burt's theories on Shakespeare in relation to pornography, the three films are to be analysed. The first film is a Dutch production by the name of *Phileine Zegt Sorry*, which in itself questions the boundaries of aesthetic representation. The second film offered up for analysis is Lloyd Kaufman's *Tromeo and Juliet*. This film is riddled with sex scenes, including lesbian sex and incest, considered by Burt as example of "Shakespeare porn" (83). The final film to be studied is Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*, which shows the deeper layers and aesthetic appreciation of Shakespeare. While intercourse is not directly displayed, the context indicates that the lovers have sexual contact throughout. Together, these three films, all very different adaptations, should provide a conclusive response to the research question: what does it mean for Shakespeare's assigned high cultural image, which many critics and observers assign authority to, when popular culture, the opposite of what Shakespeare stands for, adapted his plays? For clarity, when references are made, for instance (1.3.45), these are lines referring to Shakespeare's original *Romeo and Juliet* that are copied in the films.

### **Shakespeare: Aesthetically refined, timeless and complex**

Lanier explains that popular culture could be seen as “aesthetically unsophisticated, disposable, immediately accessible and therefore shallow, concerned with immediate pleasures and effects, unprogressive in its politics, aimed at the lowest common denominator, mass-produced by corporations principally for financial gain” (3). While this is in contrast with “icon of high or ‘proper’ culture” (3), Lanier does argue that adaptations in popular culture can be worthwhile. Now established as an extremely important cultural icon, it is safe to say that Shakespeare’s position as such has come about for specific reasons. His oeuvre possesses certain elements that combine to enhance this status. Many consider these to be his use of language, lively characters and their development and chronology in storyline.

#### *Shakespearian Language*

Often considered the most important element for Shakespeare’s assigned high cultural status is his language use. Several books have been written about all the puns and layers found within his sonnets and plays, and his works have been approached as a linguistic corpus. His language use is perhaps the biggest contributor to the concept “of aesthetic appreciation” (Lanier 58). Aesthetic appreciation is a term which Immanuel Kant mentions when he tries to explain his vision on what art is; and what it is supposed to evoke. This is a “complex matter, involving both emotional and intellectual factors” (Sheppard 64). Sheppard states that the emotional element that is found within aesthetic appreciation is extremely important because it gives the spectator an emotion called “aesthetic pleasure” (Sheppard 64). Set apart from the common emotional spectrum, it can be explained as follows “a tragedy may arouse pity and fear in the spectators and yet they take pleasure in watching it. It is these other emotions which are often said to be aroused in a special, detached, ‘aesthetic’ way” (Sheppard 65).

As stated, Shakespeare receives aesthetic appreciation because of “his mastery of stylistic history and linguistic subtleties” (Lanier 58). As Pierre Bourdieu explains, this is the “‘pure gaze’, the ability to distance oneself from art’s practical function and appreciate its aesthetic qualities for their own sake” (4). Shakespeare offers access to “moral and aesthetic universals abstracted from experience, and a ‘proper’ response requires us to read through even realistic details to those universals” (Bourdieu 4). Shakespeare’s manner of using his language with its “meaning, allusion, reference, repetition, double meanings, syntax, metre, verse-lining, rhetorical structure, exchange of lead, interruption, silence and description of speech or action” (Brown. J.R. 106), are all part of his depth and strength. Lanier explains that “high culture has erected Shakespearian language as a signal stylistic achievement in English and thus an argument for the value of tradition” (57). He also argues that an important reason for keeping Shakespearian language intact is that

Shakespearian text [is seen as] the ‘authentic’ Shakespeare. Since it is treated as secular scripture, meaningful in its ever-receding depths ‘Where else might one locate the authentic Shakespeare than in Shakespeare’s exact words?’” (Lanier 58). Of course, ‘authentic’ is a relatively difficult term, as Jonson analyzed in depth, in relation to Shakespeare. (Lanier 25)

This is, however, a discussion for another paper. Shakespeare’s language use can thus be considered as an important, perhaps even the most important feature of Shakespeare’s high cultural status.

### *Shakespeare’s characters and their development*

Another feature of the timelessness of Shakespeare is the development found in his characters. Nearly all of them have double layers within their character that go hand in hand with the verbal double entendres. Within *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio is perhaps the most

prominent of these, that can serve as an example to highlight the depth of Shakespeare's characters as expressed through their language. Mercutio has occasionally been seen as a self-projection of Shakespeare. One aspect that caused this perception is his beautiful language use with all its imagery and truths about human nature and other aspects of life (Grunes). The other aspect might be Mercutio's veiled homosexuality. In Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* there is a homoerotic portrayal of Mercutio. In an interview at the time of the film's release, Zeffirelli announced that "Mercutio [might have been] Shakespeare's self-projection [and] was homosexual like Shakespeare" (Grunes). Occasionally, scholars have given suggestions that Shakespeare may have been homosexual. Joseph Porter, for instance, stated that Shakespeare's acceptance of homosexuality is found in his invented character of Mercutio and for Porter, "Zeffirelli's film initiates a reversal [for homosexuality in society at that time], restoring to the friendship between Mercutio and Romeo its intimacy and erotic charge" (Donaldson 159). Porter perhaps goes too far in claiming that in the lines "O that she were/ An open-arse and thou a poperin pear!" (2.1. 37-38), Mercutio is wishing for Romeo such heterosexual intercourse as a homosexual might imagine (161). This line is spoken in conversation between Mercutio and Benvolio about Romeo being in love with, they think, Rosaline, and could also mean that "Mercutio is accusing Romeo of wishing to take Rosaline anally" (Wells 145). Given these interpretations, doubts of Mercutio's homosexuality remain. However, Zeffirelli's interpretation of Mercutio leaves little doubt of his homosexual nature.

Given all these examples that acknowledge the deeper layers of Mercutio's character Shakespeare shows his exceptional ability to show how characters develop and contain deeper layers than one might read on a first basis. In fact, Shakespeare is so skilled at the ambiguous use of language that new interpretations of his plays continue to emerge even today.

One other feature that contributes to Shakespeare's high cultural status is that of the storyline. Many of Shakespeare's plays are written within a certain chronology of actions that



underline their subject matter. In the particular play of *Romeo and Juliet*, the actions that are performed in the play foreshadow that it will end in a tragedy. For instance, Mercutio's death is of great importance as it a direct cause for Tybalt's death and ultimately leads to Romeo's exile and consequential suicide in the end. This is only one example of Shakespeare's feature of the storyline but it is important when analysing the adaptations. There are more features important as well to gain the aesthetic appreciation and contribute to Shakespeare's high cultural status. Themes and atmosphere are also important features but these are mostly found within the language.

### **Shakespeare Porn**

Some modern adaptations contain explicit sex scenes. Burt has studied various films that fall in this category and could even be considered part of the porn industry; a genre that Burt has named “Shakespeare porn” (82). These pornographic Shakespeare adaptations have one or more Shakespearian characteristics such as Shakespearian language, chronology, character names and themes (85). Burt argues several visions about these Shakespeare porn adaptations. Firstly, he states that Shakespeare porn should be part of academic context. Many critics disagree for they accuse these adaptations of being “tasteless, ‘politically incorrect” (87). Burt believes that Shakespeare porn functions as “cultural capital, but it does so primarily inside the [porn] industry” (83). He explains this further by saying that “Shakespeare porn is now sold primarily because consumers (mostly male, of course) want to see the porn stars in it, not because they want to see an X-rated costume drama or classic”.

However, Burt contradicts his own argument by explaining that Shakespeare porn cannot be seen within academic context because it is caught in “structural impossibility” (83). This “structural impossibility” he describes as follows:

The consequence is that harmony, congruence between the filmic narrative (the unfolding of the story) and the immediate display of the sexual act, is structurally impossible: if we choose one, we necessarily lose the other. In other words, if we want to have the love story that ‘takes’, that moves us, we must not ‘go all the way’ and ‘show it all’ (the details of the sexual act), because as soon as we ‘show it all’, the story is no longer ‘taken seriously’ and starts to function as only a pretext for introducing acts of copulation. (Burt 83-84)

After explaining this, Burt continues to explicate the importance of studying Shakespeare porn and therefore seemingly contradicts his previous argument yet again. Shakespeare porn should be a part of Shakespeare’s academic context because “in softcore and hardcore

Shakespeare porn, there are no or next to no actual lines from the plays. This is particularly true of Shakespeare porn, in which not everything is necessarily sexualized” (84). Rather than dwelling on Burt’s arguments, analysis of the three adaptations should offer more clarity on the subject of Shakespeare porn. Lanier’s features that together assign Shakespeare’s high cultural image are applied the chosen three adaptations which contain explicit sex scenes to discover whether or not Shakespeare’s high cultural image is degraded specifically because of these sex scenes.

### Chapter 1: *Phileine Zegt Sorry* (2003)

The question of adapting a Shakespeare play by adding pornographic elements is one of the themes of the Dutch film *Phileine Zegt Sorry* (Westdijk 2003). Phileine falls in love with Max, who is about to appear in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in New York (Westdijk). The film is a book adaptation which itself is not based on *Romeo and Juliet*. In the film there is one scene of a fictional play that uses only one scene from the original play, namely the balcony scene. During this scene, Max as Romeo screams, "Wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied" (2.2.125). In the original play this line expresses the suggested double meaning of Romeo and Juliet's love which mediates between the physical and the emotional. The line could be only an indication for the lover's physical attraction but considering the setting, Juliet on the balcony and Romeo below on the ground, it is very unlikely this line pertains solely to their physical attraction. The lines the lovers spoke at the Capulet's ball of "pilgrims hands" (1.1.99), indicate an awareness of religious context, indicating that consummation of their relationship would be done after marriage, rather than before. Additionally, in Shakespeare's time female roles were played by boys (Kathman), which not only makes it improbable but considering the historical context even impossible to display a sexual relationship on stage. Furthermore, Elizabethan England had censorship over its theatres and Shakespeare's plays were not excepted (Schandl).

Consequently, the line could mean two things: either Romeo is not satisfied with the affection Juliet gives him or he is physically not satisfied. In his article "Wherefore Art Thou Tereu? Juliet and the Legacy of Rape", Robert Watson claims that especially Juliet's answer to Romeo's "O, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?" (2.2.125) leads to confusion about Romeo's intentions with his question. Watson explains that Juliet answers with:

[an] arguably testy question of her own: 'What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?' (2.2.126). (...) [and that she feels] fear, not just girlish generosity, in her wish that she

could retract her gift of love so she could ‘give it thee again’ (2.2.131) –an anticipation of the problem of virginity as an erotic commodity. (127)

Juliet’s response indicates that she perceives the more explicit intentions in Romeo’s line which go beyond wanting her vow of love in return. Watson goes even further in this argument by claiming the Nurse and Friar’s fear Romeo of being just a seducer as a valid point about his character (128). Carolyn Brown compares Romeo to a falcon hungry for Juliet’s response to his wooing (338). Juliet provides Romeo with precisely enough affection, or as Brown calls it: “amount of food” (342), to keep his interest in her alive. Interestingly, if Romeo is such a great seducer, Juliet is not impressed enough to invite him to her bedchamber. Jill Colaco notes that “Juliet’s refusing Romeo sexual relations is unusual, for the Night Visit, after which the scene is modelled, typically ‘ends with the woman relenting and inviting her lover to enter’” (140). In short, these studies suggest that Romeo’s line “O, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied” has two meanings, namely, that of being in love and that of being in lust. *Phileine Zegt Sorry* plays solely on this second meaning, making Romeo’s sexual affection prevail over his love.

Shakespearian passages are often cited in film adaptations and Lanier explains there are two forms. One of the forms is called “textual poaching” which is a process in which “popular culture fastens on Shakespearian passages immediately relevant or useful to its purposes without great regard for fidelity or authenticity” (52). The other form Lanier mentions is when “Shakespearian passages are disengaged from their dramatic contexts and treated as freely applicable cultural truisms” (53). This is also called “proverbialization” (Lanier 53). How this applies to this particular use of this Shakespearian line can be the subject for another research.

The citation causes even more reasons for shocking reactions and does not express the double meaning behind the Shakespearian language. In the scene, the only Shakespearian

characters are Romeo and Juliet, or at least, what is left of the two of the most iconic lovers in literature. Romeo speaks the only Shakespearian line in this fictional play, meanwhile stressing his masculinity by displaying his erection to the audience. In contrast, Juliet's character does not develop. She stands naked in front of the audience before proceeding to give Romeo oral satisfaction. After a while, she holds up a condom, indicating her consent to have sex with Romeo. The innocent nature of her character is completely missing in this adaptation. Here is a Juliet that, rather than using a witty retort to protect herself from her eager lover, gives in completely. Love is not part of the equation; Romeo and Juliet exist in a purely sexual environment. Moreover, none of the other characters are part of this adaptation, which further reduces the depth of character in the original play.

The scene only renders the balcony scene of *Romeo and Juliet* so there is little to no storyline in terms of the play. At the beginning of the performance a voice-over narrates a modern summary of *Romeo and Juliet*, saying: "We are gathered here tonight to hear the tale of *Romeo and Juliet*. Two young people in love who didn't find a way to be together, yet. Their families are in a fight but fighting true love cannot be right". He ends with a question which flattens this performance of *Romeo and Juliet* immediately, acting reductively upon his previous statement that these "two young people" are "in love". The question states that this performance will be about the sexual desire of Romeo and Juliet and nothing else, "Will there be everlasting happiness, just a quick fuck or even less? Curious? Well, let the games begin".

*Degrading Shakespeare?*

All in all, it can be said that the minimal representation of the Shakespearian features degrades Shakespeare's high cultural status. The suggested double meaning of Romeo wanting sex is stressed and, more importantly, exploited in this scene. In the performance every action revolves around sex. The audience reacts in shock because they did not expect to see the suggested and less obvious aspect of *Romeo and Juliet* so explicitly. Aside from the degradation of Shakespeare's high cultural status in this scene of the film, the film itself does contain multiple layers. Phileine, the film's main character, undergoes a development which could be compared to Juliet's in the original play. At the onset of the film, her relationship with Max and their physical attraction and sexual relationship plays an important part. Unfortunately, Max goes to New York to act in Shakespeare plays and Phileine misses him not only physically but emotionally too. She realises at the moment that she sees Max acting this sexualised Romeo that she is jealous and truly loves Max. She is not as pious as Juliet, turning her lover away until marriage, but Phileine is innocent and naïve emotionally. Both women clearly state their grounds and express their uncertainty at the end. Phileine by screaming sorry at the end of the film; Juliet by committing suicide because she loves Romeo greatly.

Aside from the double layer in Phileine's character the film itself functions on two levels as well. On the one hand there is simply the plotline, Max's on stage betrayal which forces Phileine to re-examine her relationship with him, on the other hand it poses questions about where to draw the line when it comes to expressing high art. Max thinks he is doing this adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* in service of high art, clearly impressed with the high status ascribed to acting in a Shakespeare play. Phileine has her doubts on how much of it is acting, precisely because he really has to be aroused to perform this production—so he cannot just see Juliet's character as an aesthetic object. Max needed to be aroused, within the reality of

the play, to perform this craving Romeo. The film itself contains many sex scenes and thus this very liberated Shakespeare adaptation seems to shock the spectator even more because Max is not acting—his erection is very real. Many members of the audience feel he has gone too far in aesthetic terms of expressing high art. The emotion of aesthetic appreciation is not evoked by this theatre performance because the spectator is distracted by the reality of arousal and, with it, the flatness of this adaptation. Anne Sheppard explains that a play's director does expect the spectator to be "in some sense emotionally affected (...) and not only [ to have] an intellectual interest in following the story but also some emotional concern with the characters" (27). She argues that "being moved by a play is not the same as being moved by a situation in real life". She explains this further by stating that "aesthetic theory must walk a tightrope between over-intellectualising the response to art and assimilating the response too closely to the emotional responses of real life" (27). Given Phileine's and the audience's negative response which range from "Oh no it's experimental" to "It's perverse!", it can be said that this adaptation is not likely to evoke that aesthetic emotion.



## Chapter 2: *Tromeo and Juliet* (1999)

Another film based on *Romeo and Juliet* which includes several explicit sex scenes is the 1996 production *Tromeo and Juliet*, by Lloyd Kaufman. The film was produced by a company called *Troma Entertainment*. This company produces B-movies and are known for their “surrealistic or automatistic nature, along with their use of shocking imagery; some would categorize them as ‘shock exploitation films’” (Haden). While the film does contain some Shakespearian elements, such as language, characters and storyline, most of these features are drawn out of their original context.

Several lines, more than one might expect from this B-movie, of the original play are spoken in the film. However, many of the original lines are adapted to suit the modern setting. The film begins with the chorus, which explains “Two households, different as dried plums and pears. In fair Manhattan where we lay our scene.” Tromeo sees Juliet at the Capulet’s party, rather than at a ball as in the original. Tromeo speaks the following lines, staying true to the original text:

O, she doth teach the torches to shine bright

See how she hangs upon the cheek of night

Like a rich jewel in a barbell’s ear

Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear

Did my heart love till now?

Forswear it, sight!

For I ne’er saw true beauty till this night. (1.5.45-52)

Tromeo speaks these lines very slowly and almost in a staccato manner, which does not do justice to the depth of Shakespeare’s language. The comparisons, rhyme and the hereby certain stressed syllables and words are omitted. It even makes Shakespearian language come across as boring and old-fashioned because the flow and beautiful expressions are completely

lost. Other Shakespeare's original play lines are altered to suit the adapted scene: words or entire sentences are rephrased. When Juliet is locked up in a Plexiglas box and Tromeo comes to save her, Tromeo speaks,

What light from yonder Plexiglas breaks?

It is a right angled cosmos and Juliet is the sun.

See how she lays her cheek upon that hand.

O if I were a glove upon that hand

So that I might touch that cheek. (Kaufman)

Of course, the original line used for this passage is as follows: "What light through yonder window breaks? / It is the east, and Juliet is the sun" (2.2.2-3).

Aside from the return of some of the original lines, even with alternations, the language mostly spoken throughout the film is American English. The register is highly vernacular, including slang and obscenities. Tromeo and Juliet are the only characters using Shakespearian language, setting them apart from the others and lending credibility to their love. The lovers mostly have a very sexual and physical relationship throughout the film, Shakespearian language seemingly to function only on the level of emotional connections. While this may be Kaufmann's intention, it does not explain why the two characters speak in such a staccato manner when they use Shakespearian register.

The characters and their actions are mostly similar to the play but their names are corrupted. For instance, Romeo is in this film Tromeo, Benvolio is Benny, Mercutio is Murray, Paris is London, Montague is Monty Q and Capulet is Cappy Capulet. Most of these characters do not undergo any development nor express the duality of character present in Shakespeare's play. For instance Tromeo's character seems to mainly be focussed on having sexual intercourse, while Romeo's original character has to make choices between his friends, and love for Mercutio or maintaining a relationship with Juliet. This relationship with Juliet

has two sides as well. On the one hand, he loves Juliet not only for her appearance but for her character as well, or he would not marry her. On the other hand, Romeo wants the physical relationship and desires Juliet. These two sides do not come forward in Romeo's character. Another one sided character is Cappy Capulet, who fulfils the role of villain in the film. He beats up Juliet's mother, almost rapes his own daughter and threatens Benny and Monty Q with a crossbow. In the original play he does come across as having an authoritarian character but not as a villain. He stops Tybalt from fighting Romeo which is the very catalyst to Romeo and Juliet meeting and falling in love. The loss of depth with the original character is also found in the Nurse's character. In the play, many of her lines can be interpreted in several ways and she plays an important part when it comes to helping Juliet winning Romeo. She is Juliet's care-taker and does not come across as a young woman in her twenties who is Juliet's friend. Especially the Nurse's age being not very young is expressed in the lines "She's not fourteen/ How long is it now to Lammastide?" (1.3.14-15). In contrast, the Nurse in the film adaptation is called Ness and is in her twenties. Ness has a lot of tattoos and piercings and does not come across as a good caretaker for Juliet. She is even in love with Juliet and seduces Juliet to have sex with her. She speaks little in the film but she does come across as jealous of Romeo because Juliet is in love with him. Juliet's film character is not that of an innocent fourteen year old girl either. Juliet's appearance is different compared to the other characters, no tattoos or piercings but long blond hair and little make-up. She appears as an innocent young girl but none of her actions stress this part of her original character. She has homosexual relations with her nurse and sexual nightmares and she masturbates off a picture that looks like Romeo. Another important character in the play is Mercutio, who dies early on in the film and does not get the chance to perform his queen Mab speech completely. It is relatively short and contains a lot of unimportant information and no message. His character is of little importance in this film.

Aside from Shakespearian language and characters alterations the storyline of Shakespeare's original play is transformed as well. The film is divided into acts and the film starts with a modern version of the Shakespearian chorus, which explains there is a feud between Cappy Capulet and Monty Q. The beginning of *Tromeo and Juliet*'s storyline starts as the original play. Tromeo is first in love Rozy. After Tromeo sees Juliet at the Capulet's party and falls in love with her and forgets Rozy. Another similarity is the fact that Tromeo and Juliet marry and Murry, Mercutio's character dies. However, the last act of the film alters the original storyline because Tromeo kills Cappy Capulet and Tromeo and Juliet do not die. Monty Q, who is dark skinned explains to Tromeo and Juliet that he adopted Tromeo, revealing that Tromeo and Juliet are brother and sister. This unfortunate information does not stop the lovers, in the epilogue they have three deformed children and live happily ever after. Given this ending, little of the tragic Shakespearian story is captured in this film.

#### *Degrading Shakespeare?*

Given that most of the Shakespearian features are misused and altered, and almost everything is sexualized, little of Shakespeare's depth is found in the film adaptation. According to Daniel Rosenthal *Tromeo and Juliet* is, "that nadir of screen Shakespeare [which] takes every major character and incident from *Romeo and Juliet* and systematically drains them of humanity in a tedious, appallingly acted feast of mutilation and soft-core sex" (221). Lanier labels *Tromeo and Juliet* as a parody of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (101). He also states that the film "fits poorly with high cultural standards of verbal sophistication" (100). His vision of the contrast popular culture assigns to Shakespeare comes back in this film, for this adaptation "can serve as a vehicle for class re-sentiment, a way to affront and critique the power of bourgeois canons of propriety that, in this case, are bound up with high art and

Shakespeare” (101). The analysis above, which indicates the lack of the Shakespearian elements, can be found in Lanier’s arguments as well. He too says that:

Tromeo and Juliet are hardly virginal innocents—Tromeo masturbates to pornographic CD-ROM versions of Shakespeare plays, and Juliet has lesbian sex with her maid Ness—yet for all their carnality the two are presented as a romantic ideal, albeit a half-parodic one, rebelling against the hypocritical, upper-class Cappy Capulet (the villain of the piece), at one point smacking him with Shakespeare’s collected works. (101)

Lanier does point to what he thinks this film is trying to express. This is the objection to Shakespeare only belonging to high culture and not being for all people, a form of social comment. The film means to bring Shakespeare to the mass public and given the analysis this film seems to achieve this by ignoring most of Shakespeare’s depth and sexualising almost every aspect of the original story. This makes it a commercial exploitation of Shakespeare and given the extreme and explicit sex scenes used Lanier’s social comment aspect seems to be farfetched. Lanier finds it offensive to realise that this film uses sex as the main objective for selling Shakespeare to the masses. This intention of the film can be considered worthy, as Shakespeare wrote for the masses of his time (Lanier 22), but this film goes very far in their “‘improper’ accents” (Lanier 101). Furthermore even in this age of sexual liberation this particular film is hardly the choice of the masses.

Richard Burt counts this adaptation as “Shakespeare porn” (82) and identifies this particular film category as, “trash, kitsch, obsolete, trivial, obscure, unknown, forgotten, unachieved, beyond the usual academic purview” (83). This description of this film clearly confirms that even if worthy of academic study this particular film hardly lives up to Shakespearian standards. In Burt’s argument regarding Shakespeare porn, he includes the interesting feature of Shakespeare’s appearance in Shakespeare porn film. He explains this additional aspect with examples mainly from *Tromeo and Juliet*, in which Shakespeare

appears as a character on two occasions. Many Shakespeare porn adaptors ask for Shakespeare's approval of the rewrite, which could either be mentioned at the back of the DVD cover or Shakespeare appears as a character in the film. In a DVD cover of *Tromeo and Juliet*, Burt found a note which said: "It would not be impossible to believe, if Shakespeare were present today, that he would laughingly give his approval to the director of this Italian masterpiece" (104). Shakespeare's iconic high cultural image is used to approve of this controversial *Romeo and Juliet* version. This argument leads to the conclusion that Burt is partly in agreement with Lanier's point that this film deliberately degrades Shakespeare's features in order for Shakespeare to be accessible for every audience.

### Chapter 3: Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968)

This third film adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* contains Shakespearian language, the Shakespearian characters and original storyline that all express Shakespeare's deeper layers. These elements are mostly combined in the film. However, added to this film is nudity, which could distract the spectator from these Shakespearian elements.

The director's choice for Shakespearian language throughout the entire film is important because of its double meanings, puns and meter which enhance the play's cultural value. Certain aspects of the language are highlighted by hand gestures and eye contact. For instance at the Capulet's ball, this is apparent by Juliet's reactions of gasping at Romeo touching her hand, close-up of her large eyes as she first sets eyes on him. Another example is when Romeo and Juliet touch each other's hands while speaking "pilgrims hands do touch" (1.5. 97), which leads to physical contact between the lovers. Shakespeare's puns on "draw thy tool" (1.1.31) and "my naked weapon is out" (1.1.33), which have the association of having an erect penis (Shakespeare. Ed. René Weis 126), shows the actors bright coloured codpieces first. This close-up of their codpieces incorporates that double meaning found within the language again. The film's setting stresses the original settings of the play and add to the double layers within the characters.

All characters of the original *Romeo and Juliet* are shown in Zeffirelli's adaptation. Zeffirelli paid special attention to certain aspects of the main characters and their gender (Donaldson 153). Zeffirelli interpreted the play as follows:

Fathers rule in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and their rule is sustained by an ideology requiring young men to assert their masculinity by violence, devalue women, and defensively distance themselves from them. (Donaldson 153)

In the film, this line of thought is expressed immediately after the chorus, told in voice-over, by the Gregory character opening with the line, "The quarrel is between our masters and us

their men” (1.1.19). After a few minutes a first fight starts between the Capulets and the Montagues. In this scene, Zeffirelli stresses the characters’ manliness by filming them waist-down, hands on sword hilts and showing their bright striped codpieces (Donaldson 154). Tybalt’s manliness is emphasized even more by pausing briefly on his codpiece and showing his attractive broad shoulders and face. All the men in the fighting scene are young and attractive; “they are presented, to use Laura Mulvey’s useful phrase, ‘to-be-looked-at’” (Donaldson 154). Aside from stressing Tybalt’s masculinity, Romeo’s dilemma of needing to choose between the side of his friends or wanting to be with his love Juliet comes forth in different scenes. Romeo forgets his first love Rosaline when seeing Juliet at the Capulets ball and he also expresses less affection towards his dear friend Mercutio.

In the film, Romeo stresses the “Good Capulet” (3.1. 70) by shaking Tybalt’s hand. Their friends are laughing as if they think Romeo is joking . Mercutio does not understand and he starts fighting Tybalt and gets killed. As a reaction to this, Romeo forgets Tybalt is his kinsman and choses the side of his friends over Juliet and kills Tybalt.

At the beginning of the film Juliet’s character seems to be that of an innocent fourteen year old girl that does not know anything about love. However, she discovers her sexuality at the Capulet’s ball. Her sexual energy grows as the story progresses which especially in the balcony scene comes to a climax. Her dress reveals her cleavage and make her more sensual, which is in contrast to what Rebecca Adler seems to suggest in her review “Juliet’s bodice being too tight” (“Romeo and Juliet (1968)”), as if to make her more boyish or masculine. Her long hair falling sensually around her naked shoulders make her even more feminine. She takes the lead in the conversation and controls the amount of physical contact between her and Romeo. She dominates as “the more active, desiring subject of the two lovers” (Donaldson 165). The line “O, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied” (2.2.124) causes tension between the characters. Juliet first reacts shocked, as “the prospect of ‘satisfaction’ Romeo proposes



alarms her because she cannot dismiss from the word connotations of sexual consummation, whereas Romeo has in mind merely an exchange of faithful vows” (Donaldson 166). The deeper layers of Juliet’s character and her characters development from innocent girl to confident grown up and passionate lover are found in this adaptation.

One other important character that stands out in this film is Mercutio. Firstly his costume has a longer upper body piece of clothing, and his codpiece is not as clearly visible as with the other men. Mercutio is insulted by Tybalt and reacts by drawing his sword while sitting waist-deep in a fountain. He calls his sword a “fiddlestick” (3.1.48), which “appears from beneath the water in phallic similitude” (Donaldson 155). Aside from this less masculine aspect of Mercutio’s character, he also seems to behave as if having an “antifeminist obsession” (157). In the film this aspect of his character is stressed when the Nurse approaches him in order of finding Romeo. While she walks towards Mercutio, “Mercutio [makes use] of the occasion for an array of caricatures, obscene gestures, and physical assault” (Donaldson 157) and steals the Nurse’s head veil. This scene specifically shows that:

devaluation of women in the banter of the young men—especially allusions to rape and sexual assault—cut [by Zeffirelli] from the speeches of the other youths [for instance Benvolio and Gregory] and stands out clearly as a special preoccupation of Mercutio. (Donaldson 157)

This antifeminist behaviour of Mercutio can be seen as an expression of his jealousy for Romeo’s love for Juliet because Mercutio has been said to be homosexual (Donaldson 160). It has also been said that Mercutio and Romeo share a homosexual relationship. This piece of storyline is found in the play as well but had not been expressed in previous film adaptations. Zeffirelli emphasized this relationship in the manner the actors spoke certain lines and their gesture that went together with these lines. The scene when Mercutio delivers his queen Mab speech contains elements that express their homosexual relationship. Near the end of his

speech, Mercutio appears to be angry and runs off to an open courtyard where he continues in an angry voice:

This is that very Mab  
 that plaits the manes of horses in the night  
 And bakes the elflocks in foul sluttish hairs  
 Which once untangled, much misfortune bodes  
 This is the hag  
 When maids lie on their backs  
 that presses them and learns them first to bear  
 Making them women of good carriage  
 This is she— (1.4.88-94)

He repeats the last line twice and the last time he speaks in whisper “This is she” (1.4.94). This final repetition “suggests a partial awareness that his inventiveness and improvisation mask an identification with the [devalued] women his discourse and antics invoke. He himself is Queen Mab: she arises from his own pain and confusion” (Donaldson 158). Alternatively, Mercutio could be jealous of Romeo’s greater interest in women than in men. Given these different interpretation, Mercutio’s identification with Queen Mab is of less importance than his sense of rivalry with females over his friend. It almost seems as if Mercutio knows Romeo is about to meet Juliet and will therefore love Mercutio less.

The storyline of the film is chronological in concord with the play. The details in the scene of Mercutio’s death and the cause for Romeo to kill Tybalt already give away the story is a tragedy and more death shall follow. The lovers do not live happily ever after but die at the end of the film which keeps the tragic nature of the play.

*Degrading Shakespeare?*

Shakespeare's deeper layers and aesthetic value are very present in this film. His language with its depth is spoken and enhanced by body language. The addition of nudity does not distract the viewer from the depth and deeper layers the play possesses. The nudity has the function of expressing the innocence of the lovers' inexperience and binding them not only in an emotional but also in a physical way. Especially Romeo's naked back shows off his male beauty and still boyish character. His gentle character comes across when he looks up at Juliet, who seems to be naked as well, with her breast mostly covered by either linen or her long hair. Zeffirelli shows the physical intimacy and desire between Romeo and Juliet by stressing the beauty of their bodies and close-ups of specific body parts. He shows just enough nudity for the film audience to understand the lovers consummated their marriage and deepened their love through this physical act. At the time of the film's release, the nudity displayed in scene did cause controversy. The actress that played Juliet was Olivia Hussey. She was only fifteen at the time the film was made and making her the youngest actress to appear topless on screen (Rosenthal). In an interview Hussey explained that "at the time, I don't think anybody in English cinema has ever done anything like that. I was nervous about the scene but it was done so tastefully that I was happy with the scene" (Hussey). Zeffirelli explained to her and the audience that he wanted the scene to portray "the beauty [of sexual intercourse], it was that they [Romeo and Juliet] were so inexperienced and so young" (Hussey). Controversial or not, Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* expression of sexual intercourse at the time was mainly functional and does not degrade Shakespeare's high cultural image. The portrayal of Mercutio's homosexuality is not done with explicit sex scenes and whilst possibly equally controversial falls outside this thesis. The choice to stay as close as possible to the original language and setting provides the viewer with the aesthetic emotion Shakespeare is known to evoke.

## Conclusion

Lanier and Burt both consider Shakespeare adaptations that contain explicit sex scenes worthy of academic study. Moreover, Lanier believes that some of the value of bringing Shakespeare to the masses in this way lies in the social comment that represents. *Phileine Zegt Sorry* ridicules Romeo and Juliet's relationship into being "a quick fuck" and does not give a good account of the depth found within the original balcony scene. The use of the sole line of text belies the depth of Shakespeare's original scene. The film itself possesses deeper layers and questions the aesthetic boundaries when it comes to expressing sexual intercourse in theatre. The aesthetic emotion Shakespeare's adaptations should convey is probably not evoked with the viewer when watching this film. In *Tromeo and Juliet* nearly all of Shakespeare's depth is flattened and almost everything is sexualised. Lanier argues that Shakespeare's depth is flattened intentionally in order for Shakespeare to be more accessible for a wider audience. This aspect is in line with Lanier's argument that popular adaptation of Shakespeare's plays, with explicit sex scenes, are worthy of academic study. However, at the same time Lanier finds it offensive that Shakespeare's worth is diminished mainly by means of sex, which for sure, even in these sexual liberated times, is not the choice of the mass audience. Burt mainly uses *Tromeo and Juliet* as an example for Shakespeare porn, and his verdict on this film supports the view it degrades Shakespeare's high cultural status. Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* expression of sexuality was controversial for its time. Nudity has a function and does not distract the viewer from the original language and setting the film shows, which will evoke the aesthetic emotion Shakespeare's plays contain.

Based on the films studied in this thesis there appears to be more reason to believe that adding explicit sex scenes to Shakespeare's plays degrade their aesthetic value. The studied more explicit films of *Phileine Zegt Sorry* and *Tromeo and Juliet* do not bring Shakespeare's full meaning and value to the masses, but rather exploit the Shakespeare name as commercial

teaser to capture an audience. It may well be that Zeffirelli's adaptation being so close to the original does bring Shakespeare to a wider audience. Shakespeare adaptations with explicit sex scenes or Shakespeare porn as Burt would call these adaptations, can be seen in an academic context but it must be kept in mind that these adaptations will mostly degrade Shakespeare assigned high cultural status. Shakespeare can be modernised but in order to maintain Shakespeare's high cultural and aesthetic value sexualising the original alone will not achieve the goal to bring Shakespeare to the masses. Lanier also states that the "Shakespearian elements or adaptations found in popular culture could give more insights into 'Shakespeare and what he might mean'" (4). Given this statement further research regarding the role of Shakespeare in popular culture would be of great help in studying the question Lanier proposes on whether these adaptations give new insights into Shakespeare's intentions. Two things are certain: *Romeo and Juliet* continues to fascinate directors and audiences alike, owing to Shakespeare's ability to create something truly timeless, and Shakespeare reputation as the Bard of England remains intact even if adapted into Shakespeare porn.

### Works Consulted

- Adler, Renata. "Romeo and Juliet (1968)." *The New York Times*. Oct 9, 1968. Web.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge and Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984. Print.
- Brown, Carolyn E. "Juliet's Taming of Romeo." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 36. 2.(1996) : 333-355. Web.
- Brown, John Russell. *Discovering Shakespeare. A New Guide to the Plays*. London: The Macmillan Press, 1981. Print.
- Burt, Richard. *Unspeakable Shakespeares. Queer theory and American kiddie culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. Print
- Colaco, Jill. "The Window Scenes in Romeo and Juliet and Folk Songs of the Night Visit." *SP*. 83,2 (1986) : 139-59. Web.
- Donaldson, Peter S. *Shakespearean Films/ Shakespearean Directors*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1999. Print.
- Frye, Northrop. *The Anatomy of Criticism*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957. Print.
- Grunes, Denis. *A Short Chronology of World Cinema*. Big River Books, 2010. Web.
- Haden, Anthony. Horror Showman. "How Lloyd Kaufman of Troma Entertainment (Class of Nuke 'Em High; The Toxic Avenger) became the City's Leading B-movie Auteur." *New York Magazine*. 27 Nov. 2000. Web.
- Hoenselaars, A.J, ed. *Reclamations of Shakespeare*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 1994. Print.
- Hoenselaars, A.J., ed. *Shakespeare and the Language of Translation*. Arden Shakespeare, 2004. Print.

- Hoenselaars, A.J., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Contemporary Dramatists*. Cambridge University Press, 2012. Web.
- Hussy, Olivia. Interview by Peter Canavese. *Romeo and Juliet*.(2008). Web.
- Kathman, David. “How Old Were Shakespeare’s Boy Actors?” *Writing about Shakespeare* 58. Mar. 2007. Web.
- Lanier, Douglas. *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*. Oxford Shakespeare Topics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Print.
- Phileine Say Sorry*. Dir. Robert Jan Westdijk. Perf. Kim van Kooten, Michiel Huisman, Hadewych Minis, and Tara Elders. Fu Works and A films, 2003. Film.
- Porter, Joseph A. *Shakespeare’s Mercutio: His History and Drama*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989. Web.
- Rackin, Phyllis. *Shakespeare and Women*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.
- Romeo and Juliet*. Dir. Franco Zeffirelli. Perf. Leonard Whiting, Olivia Hussey, John McEnery. Paramount Pictures, 1968. Film.
- Rosenthal, Daniel. *100 Shakespeare Films*. British Film Institute Screen Guides. London, 2007.
- Sanders, Julie. *Novel Shakespeares: Twentieth-Century Women Novelists and Appropriation*. Manchester University Press, 2001. Web.
- Schandl, Veronika and Nataliya Torkut. “Marooned Texts, Shipwrecked Performances: Shakespeare and Censorship.” *European Shakespeare Research Association*. Montpellier, 2013. Web.
- Shakespeare, William. René Weis, ed. *Romeo and Juliet*. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2012. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. David Scott Kastan, ed. *Henry IV. Part 1*. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2002. Print.

Sheppard, Anne. *Aesthetics. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art*. Oxford University Press, 1987. Print.

*Tromeo and Juliet*. Dir. Lloyd Kaufman, James Gunn. Perf. Jane Jensen, Will Keenan, Valentine Miele, William Beckwith. Troma Entertainment. 28 Feb 1997. Film.

Watson, Robert N., and Stephen Dickey, eds. "Wherefore Art Thou Tereu? Juliet and the Legacy of Rape." *Renaissance Quarterly* 58 ( 2005) : 127-156. Web.

Wells, Stanley. *Shakespeare, Sex and Love*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Print.

Wells, Stanley. *Shakespeare and the Moving Image: the Plays on Film and Television*. Ed. Anthony Davies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Print.

"What Each Rating Means". Motion Picture Association of America. 2013. Web.