

# A Tale Told by Many Other Names: Films of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

by Cliff Butler

## Prologue: *Romeo and Juliet* in a series of Veronas

“Two households, both alike in dignity” (Shakespeare 1.1.1), engaged in a long violent feud. A romance between “a pair of star-crossed lovers” (Shakespeare 1.1.6) known to the masses, often ending in death. These, of course, are identifiers of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Despite the often (mis)representation of Shakespeare's plays as an unreachable, elevated, “high and mighty” canon, the world unashamedly loves his tragic tale of the two doomed lovers, and in accordance with “our belief that Shakespeare's plays, in order to be truly and fully understood, must be seen as well as read” (Anderegg), film is one of the most common ways of engaging with Shakespeare beyond the English classroom. The most iconic scene from *Romeo and Juliet* is undoubtedly the balcony scene. Time and time again we follow Romeo as he explores the “light (that) through yonder window breaks” (Shakespeare 2.2.2), the fiery sun that ignites his heart, and whether his Juliet is found in Natalie Wood (Maria, *West Side Story*, 1961), Olivia Hussey (Juliet, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1968), Claire Danes (Juliet, *Romeo + Juliet*, 1996), Gwyneth Paltrow (Viola de Lesseps, *Shakespeare in Love*, 1998), Emily Blunt (Juliet, *Gnomeo & Juliet*, 2011), or in Rachel Zegler (Maria, *West Side Story*, 2021), she always speaks again to her lover as the bright angel she has become—both for Romeo and the audience (Shakespeare 2.2.29) Then, “O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?” (Shakespeare 2.2.36) Juliet famously exclaims in response from atop her balcony, looking for her lover, her star-crossed lover that she is kept from by family and fate, but as she looks for her Romeo, she looks not for his name, but for the love-filled escape she hopes to find. Whether her Romeo is found in Richard Beymer (Tony, *West Side Story*, 1961), Leonard Whiting (Romeo, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1968), Leonardo DiCaprio (Romeo, *Romeo + Juliet*, 1996), Joseph Fiennes (William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare in Love*, 1998), James McAvoy (Gnomeo, *Gnomeo*

& *Juliet*, 2011), or in Ansel Elgort (Tony, *West Side Story*, 2021), he always replies to be called only love, and never again be Romeo (or by what other name he happens to carry) (Shakespeare 2.2.53-55). The idea of the power held by names is prevalent throughout *Romeo and Juliet* both in original form and in all reinterpretations. The story acts as a tale told by many other names than the origin, with many alterations, liberties taken, as different directors and creators work to “attempt to illuminate one or more facets of Shakespeare's meaning” (Anderegg). In film, “our culture has created, in effect a ‘new’ theatre for Shakespeare, with a new audience” (Millard), and throughout time, we have reinterpreted *Romeo and Juliet* repeatedly as new audiences emerge and develop.

## Act One: Adaptation, Interpretation, and Recognition of *Romeo and Juliet*

*Act One, Scene One: Romeo and Juliet can be successfully adapted/interpreted as film*

As film interpretations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* gradually emerged into pop culture, they were met with criticism from scholars of literary, theatrical, and film disciplines in that the art forms are too far removed from each other in distinction to be merged in adaptational projects. However, Shakespearean text, by nature, invites adaptation, reinterpretation, and differences within perspectives and portrayals. Shakespearean film directors are meant to simultaneously “synthesize Shakespeare's verbal dexterity and film's visual power” (Crowl, qtd. in Borlik), which is in fact a difficult task to perform well, but as proven by a long history of successful, critically acclaimed, and well received films, is entirely possible. Sidney Homan presents a very well written account of the arguments and ideas surrounding Shakespearean film adaptation:

The extreme right position...holds that it cannot be done, that...the message is the medium.

The media, in this view, are antithetical, and no successful or living cross-over is possible... Moving to the left, we find the more moderate view that Shakespeare can, at best, only serve as a source of inspiration for the cinema. But the resulting product will bear little of no resemblance to the stage play... The middle view holds that he can make the journey, but that all the verbal business of the plays must be replaced by visual, cinemagraphic equivalents. Much of the dialogue must go: if there are too many problems “filming” the text’s verbal imagery, then new visual images, not originating in Shakespeare, must be found (Homan).

Homan presents these arguments as clear representations of the criticisms surrounding Shakespearean film, yet goes on to “argue that the most profitable questions to ask are not whether the cinema is too visual for Shakespeare, or whether Shakespeare is too verbal for the cinema, but rather: are there any similarities of effect and therefore of meaning in the “worlds” being advanced by artists in sight and sound?” (Homan). This presents a clear direction for cross-referential analysis of Shakespearean-based films: judgment based on effect and meaning rather than technique and authenticity. As Kenneth Rothwell comments, “In film, the aura of Shakespeare may be gone, but in the lingering afterglow, the Shakespeare-on-film critic finds a niche” (Rothwell). Shakespearean film can be processed through many lenses, theories, and from many different disciplines with histories of subscribing to specific ideologies, but as Kamilla Elliot writes, “if we use all the theories, then we will arrive at a comprehensive picture of adaptation” (Elliot). As demonstrated extensively throughout time, adaptation of Shakespearean canon—specifically through film—is not only possible but can be artistically and culturally significant as well as economically successful in the greater worldwide market of cinema.

*Act One, Scene Two: Romeo and Juliet is a perfect source to be adapted into film*

These films that reinterpret and adapt Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* are consistently evolving and changing to fit the audiences they are made for from version to version, film to film: they are

not just interpreting Shakespeare, as Ariane Balizet would put it, they are re-cognizing it. “Re-cognition, however, goes beyond a purely interpretative gesture by challenging a seemingly basic understanding of the play. Re-cognition is not the suggestion of new meaning, but the destabilizing of traditional modes of viewing the texts” (Balizet). These films employ various tactics that make them more accessible to current audiences (current, of course, being relative to the time each was released), providing an easier way to access the greatly esteemed Shakespearean tragedy without the preconceived notions of pompous elegance, overly flowery speech, or pretention. Film’s integral role in modern American pop culture situates the media form as a perfect candidate to bring forth Shakespeare in an easily accessible, understandable, and relatable fashion. The timeless narrative of *Romeo and Juliet* finds itself as one of Shakespeare’s most reinterpreted for good reason: it has become more than just a play, it has become a legend, as Courtney Lehman deems it:

Legends count on the fixed nature of their citational power regardless of changing historical contexts, the exigencies of genre, or the subjective predispositions of authors and audiences. Proceeding via a kind of cultural repetition-compulsion, legends are driven by the force of inevitability, ultimately leading to widely known and infinitely recyclable conclusions (Lehman).

It is this status as a legend that allows *Romeo and Juliet* to be constantly reinterpreted so effectively and successfully. In the commentary about *Romeo and Juliet*’s status as a legend, Chris Palmer writes, “The story has so much potential that virtually any version, no matter how stereotypes or improvised, updated, or radicalized, will move its audience” (Palmer). The general American public has a good grasp of the story’s major moments, characteristics, and plot points, providing for a shared knowledge that filmmakers can and regularly play off of and work from. The balcony scene is well enough known to be recognized with or without the “traditional” balcony set. It works just as well at a swimming pool (*Romeo + Juliet*) or a fire escape (*West Side Story*, Spielberg and Wise), and if a traditional balcony set is used, the audience reacts immediately in anticipation of the iconic lines that will soon follow in some version

or another. The throngs of love, despair, frustration, violence, and being held apart from one's passion pull at the heart of every audience member, and even as we know exactly how the story plays out, we watch it, again and again and again. As new players take the stage—in new costumes, new settings, even in full reconceptualizations—we continue to feel moved by Shakespeare's great tragedy of star-crossed lovers.

### **Act Two: The Film Representations of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet**

*Act Two, Scene One: West Side Story (Wise, 1961)*

*West Side Story* is adapted from the Broadway Musical of the same name with music from Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim and is held as a great Broadway classic. It is set in the streets of New York City, the Montagues and Capulets are exchanged for the gangs of the Jets and the Sharks, and a new conflict is based not on a family feud, but on racial tension between the white residents of the city and the Puerto Rican immigrant population. The film follows the basic plotline of *Romeo and Juliet*, allowing space for musical numbers and situational commendations, and concludes with the death of Tony (Romeo) and Maria (Juliet) following Tony's funeral procession, in which both Jets and Sharks carry the dead body off-screen, with Maria, alive, following behind. This iteration of the story appealed to a wider audience, building from the success of the Broadway musical while also employing a widely popularized medium in the movie musical format. *West Side Story* has had an extremely visible cultural impact, from Michael Jackson's "Beat It" music video and countless other parodies and cultural references, to its inclusion in the Library of Congress. *West Side Story* has been recognized extensively as a great piece of art and a phenomenal example of greatness that can come from reinterpreting Shakespearean text into other areas.

*Act Two, Scene Two: Romeo and Juliet (Zeffirelli, 1968)*

Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* is perhaps the most "truthful" adaptation. It is set in a truthful Verona during the renaissance period, and Zeffirelli uses actors that are close in age to the characters themselves. This iteration of *Romeo and Juliet* involves the essential ending as the original play, albeit with some variations in the accompanying

events: Romeo dying from self-inflicted poison, Juliet dying by stabbing herself with Romeo's dagger. This film was received well by critics and audiences alike and was nominated for Best Picture by the Academy. Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* stands to prove that a (mostly) faithful adaptation can serve as a wonderful method of expanding the reach of a particular piece of literature.

*Act Two, Scene Three: Romeo + Juliet (Luhrmann, 1996)*

Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* is the classic Shakespearean text and story fused with modern day (1990's) pop culture. It mixes styles in a postmodernist pastiche that often resembles an MTV-esque aesthetic, and overall, "Luhrmann's film creates a pop version of Verona that not only questions the traditional interpretation of the play, but also re-frames the way audiences cognize *Romeo and Juliet*" (Balizet). It ends in the same vein as the original tale, with Romeo succumbing to self-administered poison and Juliet killing herself with Romeo's weapon—in this rendition, a pistol. This movie has had a phenomenally large cultural impact, which only seems natural due to its very culture-present stylistic presentation. It also generated a large amount of box office success and heavily contributed to Leonardo DiCaprio's early fame.

*Act Two, Scene Four: Shakespeare in Love (Madden, 1998)*

John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* is perhaps the most unique reconfiguration of the legend to be included in this paper. This film centers on the poor playwright William Shakespeare himself during his love affair with the wealthy Viola de Lesseps which inspires him to write the honored romance. It exists as a comedic parody of Shakespeare the figure and of many of his works, as well as making jokes based on other writers at the time. "Kingsley-Smith, for example, argues that *Shakespeare in Love* 'respond[s] to an authorial absence created by adaptation ... enacting a comic ritual in which the death of the Author is threatened but finally averted'" (Geal). As Yong Li Lan notes, "In *Shakespeare in Love*, the tragic ending of the play is a success in the real life of the film, and the tragic ending in real life is deflected into the start of a comedy. This circle of tragedy and comedy, that turns life back into art and endings into

beginnings, is accomplished by revolving between three scenes that dissolve continuously into each other,” as Viola’s exile to America inspires William to begin writing *Twelfth Night*.

*Act Two, Scene Five: Gnomeo and Juliet (Asbury, 2011)*

Kelly Asbury’s *Gnomeo & Juliet* is by far an outlier amongst the other films included in this paper, as it is a fully-fledged children’s movie. It centers on a feud between the blue (Montague) and red (Capulet) garden gnomes of two feuding neighbors’ yards. The film has many nods to other Shakespearean works and to the man himself, as he appears as an animated statue during Gnomeo’s exile. This is the only interpretation to conclude happily, as both Gnomeo and Juliet survive, and Tybalt is revived for the curtain call included at the end of the film. *Gnomeo & Juliet* found fairly high commercial success in the box offices and brought the Shakespearean love story to children worldwide—not as a tragedy, but as a fun, Elton John-filled romantic comedy.

*Act Two Scene Six: West Side Story (Spielberg, 2021)*

Stephen Spielberg’s take on *West Side Story* serves very similar purposes to the original in terms of the role of Shakespearean adaptation in modern culture. It stays in the same period with the same conflicts, events, and classic musical numbers. The only major difference between the two iterations is the cinematographic styles and the order of songs and events. Spielberg altered the song order and, consequently, the plot. This makes his rendition a stronger deviation from the original *West Side Story*, which still retains a similar distance to Shakespeare’s work as the original 1961 film. It was well received by critics but due to several factors, including release issues and a global pandemic, it turned out to be a major box office flop. However, it is still regarded as a very high-quality movie musical, and a very good adaptation of the musical and original film.

### **Act Three: The Film Realities of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet**

*Act Three, Scene One: The Ever-Changing Reality of Shakespearean Adaptation*

As Michael A. Anderegg states, “Shakespeare must be interpreted and evaluated anew every generation,” and these interpretations and evaluations

often contradict or conflict with their predecessors. How then, do we find the “reality” of Shakespeare’s play? Robert Geal argues that the pursuit of realism is useless in Shakespearean film, as he discusses how “Shakespearean cinema’s self-reflexivity [is] praised by many critics as the medium’s principle way to manipulate and explore the plays’ pluralistic themes and overcome realist film’s monolithic interpretations.” Shakespearean films are able to recognize and address their origins within their narrative through subtle nods—for example, many of the smaller and more niche details in the background of Madden’s *Shakespeare in Love*, or, contrarily, the animated statue of William Shakespeare in Asbury’s *Gnomeo and Juliet*—which can connect the audience further to the material at view. Many arguments against cinematic representations of Shakespeare in contrast to theatrical or literary representations emphasize that the visual aspects of film may take away from the greater linguistic and depths of Shakespeare’s work but, as Sidney Homan argues, “In a sense, physical vision gives way to a metaphorical vision which at length admits a metaphysical vision,” showing how physically viewing the performance, for many, enacts the connections necessary to fully understand the breadth of Shakespeare’s work. Performance often aids understanding of the work, and as Courtney Lehman writes:

“Dramatic performance, as Worthen explains, should not be conceptualized as a straightforward ‘performance of the text but as an act of iteration, an utterance, a surrogate standing in that positions, uses, signifies the text within the citational practices of performance’ and which, as a result, achieved at least a semi-autonomous existence *apart from* the text.”

Cinematic performance can give actors the opportunity to perform in an autonomous existence, removed from the text in situations such as *Shakespeare in Love*, *West Side Story*, and *Gnomeo and Juliet*, where the performance material is far enough removed, in part, from the original Shakespearean source that the performance can exist entirely alone without any audience knowledge of the Romeo and Juliet story, albeit at a possible lesser level of appreciation and understanding of the film’s purpose.

*Act Three, Scene Two: The True Reality of Shakespearean Film*

As Kenneth Rothwell asked in a 2001 article, "Shakespeare films still trigger the cry: 'Is it Shakespeare?'" (Rothwell). To which, of course, the answer is: yes. This question directs one back to the question of the reality of Shakespeare: how do we find and define the "reality" of Shakespeare's play? "For most viewers, clearly, film captures an illusion of reality not available in the act of reading or even in the theater... Do we want this kind of reality imposed on Shakespeare's text? Or is Shakespeare, by the very nature of his poetic art, anti-representational? Perhaps the film medium inevitably betrays Shakespeare at the very source of his creative greatness." (Anderegg) Returning to Rothwell,

"This nagging interrogation concealed a deeper insecurity, what might be called 'the anxiety of inauthenticity,' the fear that any derivative of Shakespeare, mechanical reproduction as Walter Benjamin would put it, must necessarily lose the 'aura' of the original."

There is a complex nature between theatre and reality, as one is often an escape from the other, but the conflict between film and Shakespeare often arises from a misunderstanding that the only style available for films is realism. There are many ways to reveal alternative realities within film and leave a character's experiences in a subjective state, wherein the audience is left to determine what has happened on the screen before them. There are various points of criticism against adaptive, re-interpretive and re-cognitive Shakespearean films, but the benefits include bringing Shakespeare's works to more audiences that would otherwise not be able to access, understand, or become engaged with Shakespeare through the airs of pretension and formality.

"Shakespearean films (whatever their overall quality) are a rich source for the survey of trends and styles in film-making with the added advantage of a constant element: Shakespeare. We are privileged to watch Shakespeare's plays as filtered through a variety of cinematic consciousnesses as well as through a variety of theatrical traditions and social movements." (Anderegg)

The reality of Shakespeare is that it is for everyone, it has always been for everyone, and for any work to exist for a great, worldwide audience, it is *always* open to alternative interpretations without the loss of its quality as a work. A myriad of these alternative interpretations, and the most easily accessible of these for the public exists in films—namely, the film interpretations of the legend of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

**Epilogue: Romeo and Juliet Everywhere: Verona and beyond**

"For never was a story of more woe / Than this of Juliet and her Romeo" (Shakespeare 5.3.320-321). Such are the final lines of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which are reflected in some way or another in most of these films, except *Shakespeare in Love* and *Gnomeo and Juliet*, which both entail less deadly ends for our star-crossed lovers. Though most versions of *Romeo and Juliet* tell the same tale without much alteration, the work is adored and appreciated nonetheless as if they were each a fully original, standalone piece. "Texts remain alive only to the extent that they can be rewritten and [...] to experience a text in all its power requires each reader to rewrite it" (Leitch, qtd. in Walker), and every new director, actor, filmmaker, and audience member rewrites and reconfigures the story of *Romeo and Juliet* with every film released, watched, and rewatched. William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* truly is "A Tale Told by Many Other Names."

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