

The Metamorphosis of Shakespeare: Analyzing Filmed Versions of Romeo and Juliet

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1. OVERVIEW

In Addition to research and analysis of Shakespeare's play, this unit is designed to help students understand the forces of history influencing interpretations and adaptations of scripts for film productions. They should gain a greater appreciation for the collaborative nature of play interpretation and the tendency of each film to reflect the values and styles of the time and place in which it is produced as well as those of the time and place in which it is written (and, to varying degrees, the time and place in which it is set). The project is easily to other texts and authors as long as different filmed versions of the same text are available.

Increasingly, students have quit reading pleasure and are unaccustomed to using their imaginations and analytical abilities for interpretation. They would much prefer watching a film instead of reading the text because the designers, actors, and directors have done much of this mental work for them. This project is not intended to use film to replace the analysis of the text, but to use the text as the foundation for analyzing the historical influences inherent in filmed versions of any text.

2. THE TEXT

The students should have read and discussed the text to be analyzed. I suggest that they do not watch any portion of the films until after the balcony scene in Act II, Scene ii. This gives the students an opportunity to train their ears to the language and gives the teacher a chance to gradually wean students from "spoon-fed" interpretations, encourage students to provide their own analysis and compare different possible interpretations. Students should have a firm grasp of the theatrical conventions (stage directions, asides, soliloquies, etc.), plot, characters, motivations, relationships, language, and theatrical elements of the play.

In response to the difficulty some students have interpreting Shakespeare's verse, some teachers use modern language versions rather than taking the time to help students learn to appreciate Shakespeare's language. This should not be confused with teaching Shakespeare's plays. He "borrowed" most of his plots and characters from other sources, but his genius is in his language. Would you assign the Cliff's Notes for Twain or Fitzgerald instead of their texts? If your intention is simply to introduce the students to the plot and short story versions of Shakespeare's play in their book, Tales from Shakespeare (available on the internet in their entirety or in paperback form). My high school assigns one comedy and one history or tragedy each year as part of the summer reading requirement. This does not replace teaching the actual texts, but it does

familiarize students with a foundation for understanding allusions to the works our curriculum does not have time to cover.

Much as the study of musical instruments helps students to better understand mathematical or logical systems throughout life, the study of Shakespeare's text will help students with their analysis of language, style, syntax, and complex motivation in any text. In fact, students quickly overcome their fear of all literature when they see that they CAN learn to understand Shakespeare. Put famous lines on sentence strips around the classroom and encourage students to share lines that they liked. This could also be a clue as to which lines you might select for quote identifications on a test.

Prior to stating Act I, I do two short activities to help students overcome their fear of Shakespeare. The first activity helps students to grasp the language. I give them handouts from an internet site in Elizabethan vocabulary, pronunciations drill, and form of address with explanations for their connotative meanings (www.renfaire.com/language). We say these words aloud and practice putting them into sentences. Then I give them their favorite handout- a list of Elizabethan insults (www.renfaire.com/language/insults). The first column has a long list of adjectives, such as bawdy, peevish, and waggish. The second column has hyphenated adjectives, such as motely-minded, onion-eyed, and word for each column to create their own Elizabethan insult. Students are asked to use a different part of their bodies to physicalize each part of the insults as they practice delivering them. Next the students pair off and deliver their insults in front of the class as mini-scenes. They love this activity, and they forget to worry about the language.

The second activity is to learn a simple, choreographed sword fight. This is useful in acting out the play and it focuses their attention on Shakespeare's intention to create the play as theatrical entertainment, not torture for English students. We use meter sticks because they are a good length and because they do not wiggle dangerously like yard sticks do. As with any stage combat, you must make safety your main concern. Students practice the same 3-4 simple moves in slow motion until I am certain that they will be able to do the moves precisely. Any improvisation is dangerous for the other performers on stage. When they are ready, I have them insert their insults as dialogue in the fight scene. Sometimes I have the best student pair demonstrate for the class.

Many resources are available to help students and teachers with the analysis of the text. Some will have modern language translations on opposing pages from the text, some have extensive information at the bottom of the page, and some provide prose descriptions. A few basic rules should apply to any use of these resources. First, many valid interpretations are possible, but not all interpretations are valid. Second, in order to be valid, interpretations must be backed up with evidence from the text. Third, interpretations found to be "off the mark" should be handled with respect by both the teacher and the class or students will wait for you to give the "right" interpretation instead of thinking for themselves. For example, the famous line, "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?" (II, ii) is often incorrectly interpreted as "Romeo, Romeo,

where are you?” Once students learn that in Elizabethan wherefore meant why, they will be able to come up with several valid interpretations. Since she does not know he is there and does not expect him to come, the text suggests she is not looking for him. Since she goes on to say that his name is a problem because of the family feud and that they should give up their names (family) in order to be together (II, ii), this portion of the text suggests that she wistfully wonders why he has to remain Romeo (a Montague). At the end of the party scene in Act I, Juliet says: “ My only love sprung from my only hate, to early seen unknown and known too late”(II, v). This text suggests she might be frustrated, as in “ Why did you (the man fell in love with) have to turn out to be Romeo Montague?” As long as students can logically support their interpretations with evidence from the text, they should not need to agree with the interpretations on Cliff’s Notes, the teacher’s edition of the textbook, or any other resource selected to aid in interpretations. Every actor/director will interpret such lines differently in the filmed versions, so it is helpful to have students explore these possibilities on their own before watching the films. One episode of the television sitcom A Different World showed Jada Pinket (now the wife of Will Smith) as a college freshman struggling with a Shakespeare class. She overcomes her problem and delivers a monologue from the balcony scene beautifully. When the professor asks her if she understands what she has said, she delivers the same monologue in the slang of her day. Some students might have seen this in reruns. This kind of paraphrasing is a valuable exercise for students, with longer and more difficult sections as the students progress.

Shakespeare’s plays have been adapted for centuries to conform to the audiences of each generation. Some have gone so far as to change tragic endings to happy ones. I have heard of productions of Othello in which Desdemona does not die. These adaptations, valid or not, have helped to keep his fundamentally universal plays alive in a much more tangible way than any other playwrights from the Renaissance. Students could research anecdotes from theater history, or you can relate your own theatrical experiences.

- ❑ The University of Illinois did a stage production of The Two Gentlemen of Verona as a cross between the popular television show Dallas and a Frankie Avalon beach movie.
- ❑ The Illinois Shakespeare Festival did a stage production of King Lear like a post-nuclear Mad Max movie.
- ❑ The University of Southern Mississippi did a stage production of As You Like It set in the 1950’s with poodle skirts, motorcycle jackets, and even a helicopter special effect exit.
- ❑ Houston’s Alley Theatre did a stage production of Measure for Measure in which the opening scene includes the duke taking a bath in the nude while speaking his lines

3. ACTING FOR ANALYSIS

Acting out scenes or portions of scenes in class can help immensely with students interpretation an analysis. As students working in pairs or trios rehearse their lines together prior to performing, they must help each other to analyze the scene and the

language in order to decide how to say their lines and how to relate to the other characters in the scene. With the addition of action, the class also benefits from a much more intelligible delivery of the lines and a closer feeling of the entertainment Shakespeare had in mind. I recommend you do this prior to watching the filmed versions of the scenes so that students will not merely try to parrot what they have already seen.

Basic guidelines for acting beginners should include pausing for punctuation but not just because the line of iambic pentameter has ended. This does not mean that they should ignore the poetic importance of the line endings, more that the iambic pentameter is not important, but it breaks beginners out of the sing-song pattern and forces them to look for the meaning of the words they read. Another guideline for beginners is to look for excuses to move and keep “open” to the audience so they can see faces. Finally, ask students to assume that there are powerful and complex emotions behind the lines, then try to figure out what those emotions are and how they change from line to line. Do not be reluctant to stop periodically and ask the actor, “What do you mean by that line?” or “How do you feel about that?” If you want more information, most acting texts will have a section on script analysis (sometimes called script scoring or line by line analysis). This will show students how actors might dissect a scene to find the meaning of the lines and the subtextual meaning that is felt but not spoken. Specific books on acting for Shakespearean scene are readily available in bookstores in the theatre section (not necessarily with the plays themselves). My favorite acting professor swears by a book by Kristin Linklater called Freeing Shakespeare’s Voice

4. RESEARCH PROJECT 1: SHAKESPEARE’S INFLUENCES (OR LECTURE ON RENAISSANCE AND ELIZABETHAN THEATRE)

Before trying to see the changes created in each film version, students should understand Shakespeare’s influences as an Elizabethan playwright writing for the Globe Theatre. For example, what were the expectations for arranged marriages and parental approval? Why do Romeo & Juliet talk about their feelings at a balcony instead of being physically together? Could it have something to do with women’s roles being played by boys according to English law?

Shakespeare’s source material for the play is a long narrative poem from the 1500’s, but even that was a retelling of an ancient story. Classical mythology includes the story of Pyramus & Thisbe, young loves similar to Romeo & Juliet. Forbidden to see each other, they meet secretly until circumstances fool them into believing the other is dead, so each commits suicide. A reading of this short tale would be a good introduction to a discussion of Shakespeare’s source material. A subplot in Shakespeare’s play A Midsummer Night’s Dream has series of comical scenes about a group of low-life characters who attempt to perform this story. A similar tale from ancient Chinese folklore calls the Romeo & Juliet-like characters “the butterfly lovers”. In this version, they turn into butterflies after committing suicide.

Students should sign up for topics from a given list, with two students per topic to ensure that the class will receive sufficient information on each topic. Results could be written in the form of a magazine article with visuals and captions as well as parenthetical documentation and a works cited page, or the information could be presented to the class orally, or they could present the information on posters for the classroom. The magazine article idea causes students to write in a more lively manner than a research paper and subheadings. These can be 1-2 page papers or term papers depending on time. I would keep it rather short to leave time for Research Project II.

Remember to look for ways these might have influenced Shakespeare and the creation of Romeo & Juliet.

Research Topics

Verona

Shakespeare gives us most of the information about his Verona that we need, but one student should be allowed to research Verona and the Italian Renaissance.

Legal Restrictions and Censorship for Elizabethan Plays

This information will be critical when students consider the choices made by film makers under their own set of restrictions.

Shakespeare's source material (poem) for Romeo & Juliet

Compare the narrative poem to the play to find the specific plot ideas, order of events, change in characters and characterization, and other elements that are originally Shakespeare's.

The Globe Theatre structure

Theatre

Elizabethan poverty

Competing playwrights

Masques/Inigo Jone

Music in Shakespeare

Protestants under Elizabeth I

Elizabethan schooling

Courtship & arranged marriage

Royal patronage of theatres

Actors at the Globe

Women in theatre

Fencing/ swords

Servants roles

the new Globe

competing theatres

indoor theatres

Renaissance music

Tudor architecture

crime & punishment

Elizabethan Puritans

Elizabeth I's Reign

Shakespeare's life

tragedy(Aristotle)

Friars & Nuns

Elizabethan art

5. VIEWING FILMED VERSIONS

In most classrooms, time will not permit the viewing of several entire films of Romeo & Juliet, so I usually select two scenes to view in multiple versions. One is usually the

romantic balcony scene and the other is one of the violent scenes. This project works best when versions from several different decades are presented. This provides a broader base for identifying the ways in which the values and styles of the production period influenced the interpretations and adaptations of the script. If, however, time does not permit this in depth historical approach, teachers could compare two or three filmed versions.

Film medium itself is very different from theatre. In Elizabethan times, audiences went to “hear” a play. Modern audiences are so visually oriented, perhaps due to film and television exposure, that they now go to “see” both plays and movies. The increased importance of the visual aspects of the film, combined with the shorter attention spans of the audience, influence most modern film makes to cut a substantial number of lines from the screenplay. Kenneth Branagh’s four-hour Hamlet is a notable exception. Students should consider what is lost or gained in these directorial choices.

Selecting which video versions to show might be determined by the availability of these films in your area or your school budget, rather than ideal choices, but several versions are available in retail store for less than \$20. Don’t forget to try the university and public libraries in your area. The 1968 version directed by Zeffirelli and the 1996 with Leonardo DiCaprio as Romeo are widely available at video rental stores, while video rental stores in bigger cities will often have the old black and white versions from as early as the 1932’s. The older versions provide great contrast. The students will howl with laughter at Leslie Howard playing Romeo when he is well past the age of 30 and they will instantly notice the differences in the scenery and acting styles because cinema has change so much since then. The 1950’s version with Lawrence Harvey as Romeo will provide similar contrast. BBC television versions are often available on video at university libraries, but the BBC Romeo & Juliet is a low-budget production with muted colors and little action. Even though the film was made over 30 years ago, the 1968 version is beautifully made, and students can easily relate to the young actors. Since the 1996 version does not attempt to set the story in Renaissance Italy, it is most difficult for the students to see how influences of history effected the treatment of the story. The MTV-like approach holds the students’ attention very well.

If time and creativity permit, try showing a scene from the musical West Side Story that does not use Shakespeare’s language but retells the story as a struggle between opposing ethnic gangs in the early 1960’s in New York City. Filmed versions of ballets and operas are also available. Some of these adaptations have to do with the conventions of those art forms. The operas, for example, often have Juliet wake from her drug-induced sleep in time to sing a duet with the dying Romeo. In the ballet versions, the fights are often stylized(just as they are in West Side Story), and the conventional final dance for two has Romeo dancing with the limp body of Juliet.

Students may have seen one of the many animated versions of the play. These productions vary widely in animation quality. They may also have seen modern-language

comic versions of this tale. Peter Ustinov wrote the screenplay for 1961's comic Romanoff and Juliet. This year's Shakespeare in Love is not yet available on video, but the Romeo & Juliet plot is woven throughout the script. Students may even remember sitcom episodes devised as parodies of the play.

Before viewing, explain the purpose of the project so that students will be looking for the differences between the different films. They will have a tendency to compare everything to the first film version they see or one they have seen recently on TV, but the text should be the baseline for comparison. Ask students to take notes while they read. You can use a chart format with columns or worksheets be objective, rather than judgmental, until all of the historical research for the film productions is done.

Some of the elements students should look for in Act II, Scene ii are included in the following questions. They could easily be adapted to other scenes.

- ◆ What words are in the text but missing from the film?
What has been added or changed?
How do these cuts and changes influence our interpretation of the characters, relationship, or actions?
- ◆ What does the scenery look like?
What mood does it convey?
How would this scenery have looked to the first intended audience for each film?
How does this scenery compare to Shakespeare's lack of scenery and even the lack of darkness, since performances at the open-roofed Globe were done in full daylight?
- ◆ What do the costumes, hair styles and makeup look like?
Do they reflect the time period of Shakespeare's setting or the time period of the film production or both?
Do they represent the two families differently?
How is color used?
- ◆ What do the actor look like?
Does Juliet seem to be a girl who has not yet reached the age of 14? What nationalities do they seem to represent/ remember, Shakespeare's Juliet was played by a boy.
- ◆ How would you describe the acting styles?
Which style do you find most beautiful, most believable, or most dramatic?
- ◆ How do the interpretation of emotion and the intensity of those emotions differ?

- ◆ Shakespeare's stage directions are minimal. How does each film stage the action in the scene?
How do those actions change the interpretation of the characters, relationship, and motivations in the scene?
- ◆ How are passion and physical desire expressed?
How much physical contact is made between the lovers?
Does the physical contact or lack of it make you more or less inclined to believe they are in true love?
- ◆ How is a sense of danger conveyed?
To what extent does the music, action, and acting contribute to this sense of danger or lack of it?
Is a sense of danger important to the scene and the audience's belief that this is true love?

Some of the elements students should look for the Act III, Scene i are included in the following questions. They could easily be adapted to other scenes. This is the scene in which Mercutio and Tybalt are killed in sword fights.

- ◆ Do Tybalt and Mercutio seem to hate each other?
As the fight progresses, do their intentions change/
How long is the fight? (Assign a student to time the fights for each film.)
How is Romeo's involvement portrayed?
Does Tybalt seem to kill Mercutio on purpose?
How does Tybalt seem to feel when he learns he has killed Mercutio?
To what extent do Romeo's actions during the fight seem to contribute to the killing of Mercutio?
- ◆ How physical is the first fight?
How violent or bloody is the first fight and does that change your feelings about the character's motivations or guilt?
What weapons and fight methods are used in the first fight?
How much sweat, and agony are shown in the first fight?
How is the second fight presented differently from the first?
In the 1968 Zeffirelli version, Romeo goes looking for Tybalt to kill him.
How does this change your view of the action compared to the next or other filmed versions?
- ◆ In versions in which the fight is danced, how is a sense of danger conveyed?
These stylized fights are not meant to be "believable" but they must still produce a desired emotional response for the audience. How is this done?
- ◆ In this scene, how is comedy used?

- ◆ What words are in the text but missing from the film?
What has been added or changed?
How do these cuts and changes influence our interpretation of the characters, relationship, or actions?
- ◆ How would you describe the acting styles?
Which style do you find most beautiful, most believable, or most dramatic?
- ◆ How do the interpretation of emotion and the intensity of those emotions differ in each film version?
- ◆ Shakespeare's stage directions are minimal, how does each film stage the action in the scene?
How do those actions change the interpretation of the characters, relationships, and motivations in the scene?

6. RESEARCH PROJECT II: THE INFLUENCES OF HISTORY ON THE FILM PRODUCTIONS

This project is intended to help students understand that all films are influenced by the time periods in which they are produced. Film makers cannot help reflecting the values and styles of their own times subtle or obvious ways, so films from the 1990's do not depict hitting a child the same way a film from the 1930's could because our sensibilities have changed. This does not mean that children are not hit in the films of the 1990's, but the attitude toward that action must be different. Likewise, the sexual revolution was bound to have an impact on the 1968 version. We are all captives to the philosophy of the times in which we live, and everything we see is filtered through those ideas and ideals. Even when these filmed versions of Romeo & Juliet are set during the Renaissance, the film maker can not escape the prejudices and values of his or her times. Remind the students about the restrictions Shakespeare had as he wrote the play.

Put the students into small groups. One group should research the laws governing the film industry to see the restrictions filmmakers had to forced on them. This includes the Hayes Laws, ratings systems, banning films, and scandals.

If you have a particularly large class or technology-oriented students, you could have one group research the technological advancements in filmmaking over the decades. Then, have them research the technologies employed by the filmmakers for the versions you selected for comparison. In the 1930's, color was not available to filmmakers. When West Side Story was made many "serious" films were still shot in black and white, so this is a directorial choice. By 1996 almost no major films were in black and white, so financial success depended on the filmmaker using color.

Have each remaining group research the time period in which one of the filmed versions was created. Look for the major historical events, movements, and values of that time period and the impact those events may have had on the production. Fiction in books, radio shows, films, and television shows will give some idea of what audiences liked to seem but some research should be devoted to the realities of life. For example, depression era films often took a very lighthearted view of poverty or ignored the situation in favor of extravagant fantasies about the life of the rich. The strongest group should be assigned the most recent version since it is difficult to be objective about the times in which you live. Then, have them research the reviews of the film when it was produced to see how the intended audience perceived it. They should watch the film carefully to find examples of these historical influences on the film. The ending is particularly important. How does the film ending change the theme from the original text? They could try looking variety for film reviews. Also, Time-Life did a series of television documentaries, available on video, about the decades of this century. Books about film are plentiful.

7. PRESENTATION & DISCUSSION

Have each group present their finding to the class with video clips as examples. The rest of the class should take notes or the group should provide them with handouts. Following the presentations a class discussion comparing the versions should reflect this newfound historical perspective. I recommend the inner-outer circle method to ensure meaningful contributions from every student and to encourage students to listen carefully to each other.

RESOURCES

Try asking your history and theatre departments, school library, university library, public library before spending money at bookstores or Blockbuster Video. They will have historical background information as well as specific material on Shakespeare and theatre.

Armous, Richard, Twisted Tales from Shakespeare. Signet for McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966.

Parodies of Shakespeare's plays.

Asimov, Issac. Asimov's guide to Shakespeare. Wings Books, a division of Random House Value Publishing, 1970. Great reference book to help with interpretation.

Bettenbender, John, ed. Romeo and Juliet and West Side Story: and appreciation. Dell Publishing, 1996.

Brockett, Oscar G. The Theatre, an introduction. Holt, Reinhart and Winston, Inc., 1964.

Good background text on theatre history. Wilson and Goldfarb's book is even better but is more difficult to find.

Bulfinch, Thomas. Bulfinch's Mythology the Age of Fable. New York: Penguin Books, 1995.

The story of Pyramus and Thisbe is in this book.

Capellanus, Andreas. The Art of Courtly Love. New York: Columbia University Press, 1960.

Reference about the standards of courtship in the middle ages and into the Renaissance.

Coulton, G.D., ed. Life in the Middle Ages. Cambridge University Press. 1967.

This has a series of short pieces about all aspects of life in the middle ages. Many of my students use this book as a reference.

Davies, Anthony and Stanley Wells, ed. Shakespeare and the Moving Image. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

This scholarly text has an extensive list of filmed versions of Shakespeare's plays with essays about the nature of transferring the plays to film.

Evans, G. Blakemore, ed. Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

Gibson, Rex, ed. Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare. United Kingdom: University Press, Cambridge, 1998.

Grun, Bernard. The Timetables of History. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982.

This fabulous reference book is arranged in chart format by year, with columns for music, science, politics, literature, and everyday life. For example, a quick glance at the decades of Shakespeare's life will reveal that Michaelangelo died the year Shakespeare was born.

Morley, Jacqueline and James, John. Inside Story: Shakespeare's Theatre. MacDonald Young Books, 1996.

This children's book has terrific pictures of the Globe, actors, Shakespeare, etc.

Romeo and Juliet. Dir. Alvin Rakoff. Prod. BBC and Time Life. Ambrose Video Publishing, Inc.

Romeo And Juliet. Dir. Baz Luhrmann. Perf. Leonardo DeCaprio, Claire Danes. Twentieth Century Fox, 1996.

Romeo And Juliet. Dir. Franco Zeffirelli. Paramount Home Video, 1979.

Shakespeare, The Animated Series: Romeo and Juliet. Shakespeare Animated Films Limited and Christmas Films, 1992.

Wallis, Frank, ed. Ribbons of Time. New York: Weidenfield & Nicholson, 1998. Similar to Timetables of History, but much more visually pleasing and much less information.

West Side Story. Dir. Jerome Robbins. MGM Home Entertainment, 1961.