

Prolonging the Lifespan of the Shakespearean Archetypes in Postmodernism

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Abstract: *Postmodernist understanding of femininity allows for new approaches of Shakespeare's plays. Cinematography offered two such samples: in 1996 with Baz Luhrmann's version of Romeo+Juliet, and in 2005 with BBC series of ShakespeaRE-Told, The Taming of the Shrew, directed by David Richards. Both movies interlace femininity with the will to power, but in a system permeated by humour, kitsch and carnival. The conflict of sexes and families becomes a chance to perform a satirical show. Shakespeare proves to be an inexhaustible transcultural and transfashion author.*

Key words: *Cinematography, Conflict, Femininity, Kitsch, Politics.*

“Sergius: give me the man who will defy to the death any power on earth or in heaven that sets itself up against his own will and conscience: he alone is the brave man” [Shaw 2003: 74]

INTRODUCTION

For many of us William Shakespeare has remained the most vivid author during these four centuries since his death. Such a posthumous vivacity cannot be explained solely by the quality of his work. In terms of communication with our contemporaneity, the Renaissance and baroque writer is not the friendliest example. Not only that the language he used moved to other meanings and collocations, but even the style of his discourse, especially his verbosity, became points of interests only for scholars, snobs and elite. The explanation for Shakespeare's message being so well-preserved lies in his capacity of creating myths, legends and archetypes. These types of creations are appealing to those involved in intersemiotic translations.

By maintaining Shakespeare alive we legitimize our own creations and belittle the narcissistic *guilt* Linda Hutcheon speaks about: “postmodernism in its broadest sense is the name we give to our culture's ‘narcissistic’ obsession with its own workings – both past and present” [Hutcheon 1988:23]. When we attach new significations to a system of signs, we absorb the diachronic view into the synchronic one. The message of the new creation becomes palimpsestic and the archetypes used preserve their vitality. The fact that an archetype includes visual, audio and verbal elements allows for improvisations and additions or eliminations. Intersemiotic translation participates, in this way, to the condition of historiographic metafiction, which “questions the nature and validity of the entire human process of writing – of both history and fiction. Its aim in so doing is to study how we know the past, how we make sense of it” [Hutcheon 1988:22]. Only through an uninterrupted translation the symbolic nature of a masterpiece can be incentivized.

As Gregory Rabassa remarks: “When we translate a curse, we must look to the feelings behind it and not the words that go make it up” [Rabassa 1989: 3]. The writers, the stage directors, the painters, the graphic designers and the composers who realize intersemiotic translations, or programmatic works of art, as they are named, transfer a system of signs into a different one: letters into sounds, letters into images, or into sounds. Of course, the reverse way is possible, too. They trigger a “process of negotiation between texts and between cultures” and approach “translation as an act of creative writing” [Bassnett 2008:6]. Intersemiotic translations generate polysystems wherein diachronicity is absorbed into synchronicity.

In my paper I shall study the effects of intersemiotic translation on two of Shakespeare's famous plays: **Romeo and Juliet** and **The Taming of the Shrew**. The analysed examples are the correspondent postmodernist movie versions of the plays:

David Richard's **The Taming of the Shrew** (2005), after a script by Sally Wainwright, and Baz Luhrmann's **Romeo+Juliet** (1996). The plots of these two plays proved to be challenging for a late stage of postmodernism, when political correctness was held in great esteem. The homosexual vein in *Romeo and Juliet*, together with the anti-Christian actions of otherwise Christian characters, and the misogyny which imbues **The Taming of the Shrew** were delicate themes to be dealt with. My purpose is to highlight and assess the postmodernist changes in script and acting with regard to the two movies already mentioned. These modifications could explain Shakespeare's longevity in a post-industrial and globalised world.

MEANS OF MAKING PLAUSIBLE THE INTERSEMIOTIC TRANSLATION

The film critic Patrick Ivers considers that Shirley Henderson cast as Katherine Minola impersonates a "nasty gorgon, a monstrous tyrant with a tempestuous temper, spitting venom by the vats and in spats with each and everyone she meets" [Ivers 1]. In the BBC's TV series "Shakespeare Retold", Katherine is a Member of Parliament with prospects of becoming the leader of the opposition party. The problem is that she wants to constrain the electorate into voting her. There is no trace of diplomacy, which is weird in the case of a high-ranked politician. The plot may not be very convincing, in terms of verisimilitude, but comedy is not supposed to respect the rules of plausibility.

The scriptwriter and the director realized the intersemiotic translation by resorting to body language, political jargon and updated cityscape. The plot unfolds mainly in London and the characters sometimes speak with a cockney accent. Katherine's fits of rage are ridiculed by her dwarfish body pitted against the massiveness of the males with whom she works day by day. These males may be massive, but not very masculine. In fact, Katherine behaves in a more manly way than her colleagues. The dominated males blame the situation on Katherine being a 38-year-old spinster. The problem is relegated into the realm of biology which does not suggest that women cannot make great politicians; they have only to contain their anatomical fits and starts. This opinion results in a methodology of civilizing women: marrying and bedding them. Katherine's high position in the political hierarchy instead of supporting the cause of women's rationality, merely further compromises it. To emphasize the negative aspects of spinsterhood and ugliness, the director cast Jaime Murray as Bianca, Katherine's younger, glamorous sister. The thesis implies, thus, that a beautiful woman has no frustrations and can be the equal of any man. The paradox is perceivable at the professional level: Bianca is a shallow fashion-model attracted to Lucentio, a 19-year-old spoiled Italian, a teenager not a man, while Katherine has a more complex career and falls in love with Petruchio (Rufus Sewell), an imposing and strong-willed male. When questioned about the source of her attraction for Petruchio, Katherine invokes his force. She is powerful and needs somebody more powerful to conquer her. Up to this point, nothing new compared to Shakespeare's age. But when Petruchio has a crisis of sincerity right before his wedding and gets tipsy in order to have the courage to reveal his true self, things get complicated. Already late for the religious ceremony and without relatives to accompany him, Petruchio boldly enters the church in high heels, net stockings, a kilt, and an open blouse that makes visible his hairy chest. The same drag queen apparition will be notable in Bez Luhrmann's **Romeo+Juliet**, when Mercutio comes at the Capulets's ball dressed up like a harlot. If we had not been shown a scared Petruchio in front of the mirror, we could have inferred that his transvestite attire was the first step towards taming Katherine by publicly humiliating her. But "more information often results in less meaning" [Cronin 2001:65]. Wainwright deconstructs the original play and opens up many ways of interpretation, no one superior to others.

"REWILDENING" THE OLD PLOTS, TAMED BY OVER-EXPOSURE

Katherine is a Conservative member of the British parliament. Her freshly acquired husband is Lord Crick, the 16th Earl of Charlbury. The suggestion of eccentricity, with the

assumed ingredients of kitsch and entertainment, indicate a postmodernist aristocracy, permeated by elements of pop-culture. As the same Michael Cronin puts: "At one level, translation's *raison d'être* is its implicit ability to universalize" [ibid. 32]. Such a translation of Shakespearian archetypes is indicative of the fact that the protagonists are not antagonists and that the imperialist machoistic invasion of womanhood would be a too-easy and tricky interpretation to take. Petruchio threatens Katherine with a rape, but then blackmails her on account of her impetuous sexual cravings. First, he seduces her, and then he takes the lead. At the end of the movie we are surprised to see Petruchio in the position of a domestic careful father of three toddlers. He did not want a career for himself, but neither did he block his wife's professional perspectives. In the postmodern version, Petruchio does not colonialize Katherine. This is possible also on account of their mutual support: Katherine brings in the marriage money and fame, while Petruchio provides the aristocratic title. Taken separately, both are only simulacra – political demagoguery + decrepit nobility -, but together they find the way towards a humanized existence. The scriptwriter appears to have won the bet, as "the translated text seems to have a life of its own" [Gentzler 2001: 15].

Many critics discredited Sally Wainwright's achievement using as a peremptory argument the final speech delivered by Katherine in almost word for word Shakespeare's rendition, although the rest of the movie makes use of a modernized language. The tamed wife condemns her sister, Bianca, for conditioning her marriage with Lucentio on his signing a prenuptial contract. Right in Bianca's apartment, Katherine praises the husbands' top-position in family. The scene could easily have been labelled as misogynistic if it had not been for the amusing twists and turns of the movie. Gone are the tortures described in the original version! More or less, the politician tames herself out of love and in the closing montage we see the merry family move into number 10 Downing Street. The intersemiotic translation becomes a full-fledged comedy and ends up successfully, not just with a tepid domestic satisfaction.

THE SEMIOSIS OF THE MUSEUMIFIED LANGUAGE

A different type of intersemiotic translation realized Baz Luhrmann in **Romeo+Juliet** (1996). The transfer of signs and cultural conventions into another system results in a flamboyant rendition. Leonardo di Caprio and Claire Danes are the two protagonists in the famous tragedy transferred now in the futuristic urban cityscape of Verona Beach. The antagonistic clans, the Montagues and the Capulets, are now gangs and corporatists in the same time. Their headquarters are figured as two huge steel-and-glass skyscrapers facing each other across a large and crowded boulevard.

The semiotic strategy of the director implies preserving most of the original Early Modern English dialogue. The museumification of the language becomes anachronistic in an emphatic way because of the high-tech environment.

Another notable distortion of the original is the casting of the African-American actor Harold Perrineau as the black, gay man Mercutio. A racial and discriminatory perspective is inaugurated with this movie, as the youngsters in the Capulet gang are figured as Latin, outrageous guys. Mercutio becomes a border figure, mediating between Rome's white background and Juliet's Latin one. The Montagues are represented as established corporatists, while the Capulets are on an ascending trend line, but still wearing Hawaiian shirts, massive-gold jewellery and the blonde Juliet seems to be an unexplainable meteorite in their family.

THE SYMBOLISM OF COLOURS

Upon his death, Mercutio curses both inimical families ("A Plague o' both your houses" – internet reference to the script) and Romeo has the sensation that his new love for Juliet has made him effeminate. There are glimpses of homosexuality in this filmic version of the play. In an unconscious way, Juliet manages what Romeo's former lover,

Rosalind, did not: to dismantle the intimate brotherhood of the Montague boys. The postmodern translation of the borderline sexuality shows the apparition of Mercutio as a drag at the Capulets' masquerade. In this hypostasis, he taunts Tybalt with sexual jokes ("Oh, and but one word with one of us? Couple it with something. Make it a word and a...a blow" - internet reference to the script) and becomes violent when Tybalt, in his turn, suggests a sexual relationship between Romeo and Mercutio ("TYBALT: Mercutio! Thou art consortest with Romeo?/MERCUTIO: Consort? What does thou make us minstrels? And thou make minstrels of us look to hear nothing of discords. Here's my fiddlestick. Here's that shall make you dance! Zounds, Consort!" - internet reference to the script). This "connection between aberrant sexuality and dark skin has a long and damaging history in the imperial West dating back at least to Shakespeare himself" [anon. 7]. Caliban, too, was associated with darkness and the sentimental dialogue between Romeo and Juliet is full of references to the extremities of the colour spectrum: black and white. Othello himself was demonized on account of his swarthy complexion. Obviously, the dark-skinned characters are associated with uncontrollable basic instincts. In this way "the play signifies differently because of – indeed echoes – our racialized history of desire" [ibid. 13]. The symbolism of whiteness is exploited in the case of the two lovers' dressing-ups: Romeo turns up as an obsolete romantic knight in shiny armour, while Juliet puts on immense fluffy angel wings. Even the elevator inside the Capulets' house, wherein they have their first kiss is white with golden bars, suggesting a cage that protects their purity. In this chromatic interplay "a black Mercutio might seem to play a salutary role as the example of friendship that transcends race, ethnicity, or culture" [ibid. 4]. The possible mediation fails, anyway, because in postmodern times race is internalized. Any white person can be perceived as "black", the colour in itself having no real representation. At a symbolic level, in exchange, colours are attributed depending on contextual interests. The victim gets painted in the colour of punishment.

The same symbolic accentuation of colour is to be found in Mercutio's appearance at the Capulets' ball in guise of a drag. In the postmodern interpretation of the play Mercutio is victimized or *calibanized avant la lettre*. To calibanize is always close enough to *cannibalize*. And this is an insightful approach as long as we remember that Petruchio was pictured as a drag in the BBC's 2005 version of **The Taming of the Shrew**. But the "refurbished" Petruchio is successful at the level of the hypocritical and snobbish political elite. Dispatched at the subcultural level of Latino mobsters he would have shared the same fate with the blackened Mercutio. If the "progress in synchronicity is often paralleled by a decline in diachronicity" [Cronin 2003: 21], we could infer from these two cases of intersemiotic translation that the postmodern Shakespeare is not as tragic as the Elizabethan one, but surely is more complex.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The extensive study of the two movies has led to the conclusion that the modifications brought to the original Shakespearean scripts and the postmodern recontextualization of the initial message of **Romeo and Juliet** and **The Taming of the Shrew** did not diminish the quality of the performances. On the contrary, all these "meant a new vitality, a new willingness to enter into a dialogue with history on new terms" [Hutcheon 1988:23]. If the Elizabethan political and sociological allusions intertwined in the plays are less and less understandable, the new approaches recharge the texts with a new combativeness and stir the interest of modern-day generations. The method used by the intersemiotic translation consists in preserving the core of the original message, while the peripheral elements can vary surprisingly. Another possibility is to stress some aspects which the first creator did not consider to be of great importance. Finally, translating intersemiotically means a complex play with perspectives – highlighting and obliterating -, in order to construct new significances. The archetype can survive only in those structures allowing for continuous permutations, combinations and transformations. Shakespeare's

plays are a very resourceful material for further studies related to the unsuspected postmodernist vein of the Elizabethan productions.

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