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HONORS THESIS

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Shakespeare and Celluloid

The tensions in William Shakespeare's plays revolve around social concerns relevant to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Shakespeare provides his audience with weighty civic issues to debate, while at the same time often refraining from making obvious his own stand on these matters. For example, in *Othello*, Shakespeare addresses racial and gender relations. A strong case can be made that the tragedy of *Othello* shows that interracial love affairs should be avoided. An equally persuasive case can be made that Othello's trust of a male associate over his wife, or that Desdemona's boldness in taking charge of her own future and overstepping the authority of her father to marry cross-racially leads to tragic results. Or, perhaps, Othello's downfall is the result of Othello's own tragic character flaws, his rush to judgment -- an impetuosity perhaps associated with race -- and misplaced trust. Thus, Shakespeare has in one drama provided a complex setting in which to bring up issues of gender and race.

The social concerns that Shakespeare considers relevant, such as race, gender, and class differences, are still relevant today. However, what Shakespeare has provided is literary text, indeed a play-text that presents many possibilities for interpretation. As directors stage a

production of one of Shakespeare's dramas, they have the option of accentuating one interpretation above the rest, or of leaving the matter open to multiple interpretations. Examining a director's choices regarding the presentation of setting, character, and action can reveal that vision.

Some modern directors, both of film and theater, choose to locate their productions in the past, while others choose to update their productions, setting their interpretations in contemporary contexts. Likewise, the physical location of the players' actions is sometimes altered. The actions themselves are often invented, as Shakespeare does not provide many stage directions and thus a majority of character movement is left for the individual director to interpret. Finally, there may be changes to the characters themselves. What is the result when a character's expected race, gender, age, or ability is cast in an unconventional manner? These changes may denote specific instances where directors emphasize particular meanings or give a new visual representation of a conflict in the playtext.

Film directors have an additional interpretive advantage in being able to escape the limitations of time and space that stage directors must contend with. Certain filming techniques, such as quick edits and close-ups, can not be duplicated on stage. This is a good reason for examining film interpretations as a separate entity from stage interpretations.

However, while the medium of film provides certain directorial freedoms, it also presents certain risks for the audience. Theater productions imply discussion, interpretation, while many see film as a mode of escape, that is, the "freedom" to blindly accept what is seen on the screen as the "real."

Some critics believe that a film translation of a stage drama is necessarily an inferior product. Robert Richardson maintains, in his analysis of Laurence Olivier's *Henry V*, that "to keep any important part of Shakespeare's intention, one would have to refrain from full exploitation of strictly filmic techniques."[1] The only filmed versions of Shakespeare's work that Richardson approves are those in which the camera merely films what is otherwise a stage production. Richardson feels that using staging techniques not available to Shakespeare himself will, necessarily, betray Shakespeare's intent and therefore result in an inferior production. However, such is not the case. Indeed, strictly filmic techniques are a vital tool in modern interpretations of Shakespeare's play-texts. Modern films are not inferior products, but rather different and culturally valuable interpretations of Shakespeare's words.

With film, however, the audience runs the risk of being seduced by images and missing the director's alterations of the playtext or the implications of those alterations for our interpretation of the work as a whole. Film has a greater capacity than theater to require focus on

particular visual images, making it easy for an audience to simply observe the action and not engage in a critical discourse with the film.[2] If such a discourse is not established, the audience may become the victim of the director's interpretation, uncritically absorbing the director's presentation of various social and cultural issues and their relationship to the text. Thus, it is especially important to examine modern film productions of Shakespearean dramas, noting how directors use their medium to effect specific interpretations.

Following this are readings of two recent film adaptations of Shakespeare's work. These readings examine issues such as the representation of gender and race raised by the directors' choices of setting, character, dialogue, and action. They are examples of how we might maintain an informed dialogue with film adaptations of Shakespeare's work by actively exploring how modern film directors create, alter, and emphasize textual elements.

The text of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* provides opportunity for discussion of gender roles, particularly as they apply to sexual relations and marriage. This issue is explored against the backdrop of Benedick and Beatrice's embattled courtship and Claudio's accusations of Hero's chastity. Left open for interpretation is the assignment of ethical responsibility. Is Beatrice correct in pursuing her own head-strong path or should she be more deferential to Benedick, as well as other men? Are women unreliable sexual beings or are men fickle?

One critic claims that the vital element of the play-text is the effect of hearsay.[3] While hearsay certainly drives the plot in both the play-text and the modern film, it is important to examine what makes the hearsay work: gender expectations. Hearsay and gender role conventions are the heart of this comedy. For example, because convention holds that it is women who are sexually unreliable, the male wedding guests immediately believe Hero's accusers, despite Hero's claim of innocence.

In his film production of the play, Kenneth Branagh argues that gender equality triumphs and the noble nature of women is vindicated. Branagh uses a number of film-specific techniques as aids in illuminating his interpretation. For example, in the opening visual Branagh uses the song originally sung by Balthazar in act 2 as a unifying theme throughout the movie. As the film opens, these lines are spoken

by Beatrice in a voice-over, as the words appear, white on black, on the screen. After the first verse the visual scene appears. Branagh includes this misplaced image of playtext at the very beginning of the film as a means of telling the film audience directly what they should focus on. The song tells us that "Men were deceivers ever"[2.3.62], "To one thing constant never" [2.3.64], and "The fraud of men was ever so" [2.3.71]. This song appears again in the film, including in its given place in act 2. Through the use of this song, Branagh comments specifically on the nature of the male characters, stating explicitly that it is men, not women, who are fickle, inconstant, and deceptive in the play. This commentary is strengthened by the fact that Branagh has Beatrice read these lines. This representation of the play argues that the women are the noble creatures in the world of the play, and that the men are responsible for creating the play's social chaos. This is significant for a running argument of woman's inconstancy. As a result of Branagh's direction, the audience comes to question such arguments.

One of the earliest scenes in the movie illustrates the status quo of gender inequality in the world of the play. The opening scene of the film focuses on the return of Don Pedro and his troops from foreign parts, alternating between the actions of the anticipatory women and that of the arriving men. The women run down long corridors, through long rooms, and into a large bath, all in one shot. The men ride the hill on horseback

and perform their own bathing ritual in large troughs outside. The stage directions for these scenes are not in Shakespeare's texts. Indeed, it would be impossible to perform these scenes in a theater. A stage could not possibly be long enough to accommodate the distance covered by the women as they proceed to their bathing. Likewise, a stage would not be able to hold a number of men riding up hill on their horses. Thus the medium of film gives Branagh the opportunity to illustrate in large visual terms the beginning of the play's action and the disordered nature of gender relations.

For instance, in this scene, the women perform their actions indoors, while the men perform theirs outside. The women are physically sheltered, bathe in clean indoor tubs, and are monitored by waiting women. The men, on the other hand, bathe in troughs outside, unsupervised. Such physical representations of the social differences of the genders -- one gender is guarded, kept inside, the other has no keepers and is outside -- illustrate their inequality. Additionally, the men have horses: massive, powerful beasts. As riders, the men assume the physical power of the horses. Thus, Branagh offers us a world where men have power and women are subordinate. This social hierarchy helps to explain why male accusations will soon take precedence over female protestations of innocence.

Another example of a film-specific technique used by Branagh to further his emphasis on the oppression of women is the close-up. Using this, Branagh gives the film audience the power to secretly examine a performer in great detail. While acting the voyeur is empowering, close-ups also limit the range of interpretation possible for a film audience. In a theater production, the audience is always free to look at any area of the stage. Focusing on one character or action, rather than another, can subtly effect the way an individual interprets the action of the play. This viewer's freedom is removed, however, by the film close-up.

Sometimes close-up and directed shots are used by Branagh to reinterpret elements of the original play-text. For example, when Hero is accused of being unchaste, Branagh specifically directs the camera to Margaret's reaction to the claims. Her look of recognition and subsequent flight lets the audience know that she is aware of the source of the claim, although she does not confess to the assembly that the woman seen in private speech with a man was not Hero, but herself. In the play script, Leonato states that "Margaret was in some fault for this" [5.4.4]. It is not explicitly stated in the script itself why Margaret should bear any of the blame for the misunderstanding, as she was presumably as ignorant of Don John's plot as any of the others. True, Margaret does answer to Hero's name, but she has no concept of the consequences. Margaret does not intend to hurt Hero in this fashion. Also, by

appearing at the wedding in Branagh's version, Margaret is identified as a deceitful woman, an identity which leads her to flee rather than confess her albeit guilty ignorance.

One might speculate that Margaret is guilty simply by virtue of being a woman. Her crime, like Hero's alleged crime, is sexual seduction. There is an implication in the text, then, that Margaret is guilty of the traditional vice of Eve. Such an argument begs the question: is Margaret's guilt a result of her individual actions, or a result of her gender?

Branagh's answer is the former. By focusing on Margaret during the accusations against Hero, he lets the audience know that Margaret, while innocent of malicious intent at the time of the deception, is guilty for not having come forward with the truth during the aborted wedding. Thus, for Branagh, Margaret's guilt is not the sin of sexual seduction, but of omission.

Branagh also chooses to use a series of close-ups during that first attempted wedding. These close-ups switch rapidly between Claudio and Hero. The effect of these alternating close-ups is to magnify the intensity of the moment. The only picture for the film audience to view is the face of each individual, as their respective emotions become the focus. Through these close-ups, Branagh makes sure the film audience understands the shock, pain, and confusion felt by Hero, and the

presumably righteous outrage felt by Claudio. The film audience must follow Branagh's pointing finger and note the faces filling the entire screen. Branagh ensures that the film audience sees the despair, bitterness, and confusion on the part of the characters.

Here again Branagh's narrowed interpretation rests on issues of gender relations. The overwhelming despair of Hero's face shows the crisis a woman faces when her innocence is no longer sufficient defense. Claudio automatically assumes that the accusations of other males, and of himself, are correct and is unwilling to listen to any defense on Hero's part. Here the men, whom the audience know are wrong, are convinced of their infallibility and the women, whom the audience know to be right, are doubted. Thus Hero's despair is tied to the injustice of a social structure where the rage of men, shown by Claudio's face, is automatically accepted over the wordless innocence of women.

Branagh's close-ups also focus on Leonato's incredible rage. Leonato is incensed that one of his most precious commodities, his daughter, has been soiled. The importance of the accusation for Leonato is not primarily his daughter's loss, but the implications of this loss for his own honor. By publicly shaming Hero, Leonato absolves himself from any wrong-doing. Again, this is an injustice. Hero's honor clearly should not be secondary to that of Claudio and her father.

Beyond the wedding close-ups, Branagh makes other choices of setting that shape our perception of the action. For example, during the wedding, all the women are dressed completely in white, signifying innocence. When the focus is on them, the film audience sees a cluster of white-robed females huddling with one another against the male wrath. The women are established as a collective force against the men. Indeed, they are unified in a way the men are not. All of the women support Hero, but not all of the men support Claudio. Benedick, Friar Francis, and, eventually, Leonato side with Hero, as do all the women. These women remain in white through the end of the production, accentuating their true innocence. They are a visible contrast to the ecru coats of the men, who are also divided further by distinctions of blue and black, visual representations of their guilt and malevolence.

Color is also used to highlight the villain in this plot. One scene shows Don John running through the red-lit hallway, laughing maniacally. A wordless addition to Shakespeare's play, this scene adds further visual evidence of Don John's responsibility for Hero's alleged deception. Don John is frequently shown in red candlelight, particularly when plotting to undermine his brother, Don Pedro. The choice of lighting and the addition of the scene of him running down the hallway accentuate his evil character. The red light suggests demonic involvement, while the mad laughter points out the irrationality of his

actions. Not even the ecru coats can match the red associated with Don John. The ecru-clad men jump to a hasty conclusion, but they are also misled by Don John's plot. Branagh uses these colors to make a visual statement regarding the treatment of the two genders. The "white" women are innocent, the "red" Don John is evil, while the men at the wedding are somewhere in between, not completely innocent, and yet not nearly as evil as Don John.

Another film-specific technique Branagh uses to illuminate the issue of gender roles is a double-exposure of Beatrice on the swing and Benedick in the fountain. On a stage, this scene could only be reproduced with the two side by side. The double-exposure, however, has one on top of the other. As one comes to the foreground, the other recedes. This particular image is sexually suggestive. In this instance, the implied sex of the double-exposure accentuates the sexual energy between the sparring couple. Branagh implies that the relationship between Benedick and Beatrice is one of equals.[4] Their relationship is certainly one of sexual tension, and it is important to note that this tension is between sexual equals. Benedick and Beatrice alternate repeatedly who is in the foreground, who in the background. This is not a situation in which the female is sexually submissive; the two players alternate positions of submission and domination. Hero, however, is placed in the submissive role, always the inferior to her male accusers.

In the double-exposure Branagh shows why Hero has more difficulty than Beatrice. Branagh suggests that the equal relationship between Beatrice and Benedick is more appropriate than that between Hero and Claudio. Therefore, the complications of plot are not the result of misplaced gender equality, but of improper gender inequality.

In the final scene of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Branagh shows gender equality temporarily restored. Unlike the situation at the beginning of the film, in this scene men and women celebrate together out of doors. They perform the same dances in the same physical space. This is possible because the men have acknowledged their mistake in assuming Hero's guilt. Women have been proven chaste, while men have been proven inconstant. Branagh points out the social inequality between genders, as displayed by Hero's misfortune, and notes the sexually equitable and successful relationship between Benedick and Beatrice. Finally, Branagh is prepared to leave the film audience with the visual image of genders united, equal, and sharing the same space.

It is important to note that neither the film's introductory nor concluding scenes was in Shakespeare's playtext. The effect of these additions is to draw attention to gender inequality in the play, and project a hope for future gender equality. The result is a film that is not simply a recording of a stage production, but one that uses the power of image to provide an active re-interpretation of Shakespeare's text.

Without specifically attending to Branagh's direction, one might easily conflate Branagh's interpretation with Shakespeare's text. In reality, Branagh has provided his vision of Shakespeare's playtext, focusing on gender relations and showing how gender inequity can lead to conflict.

When Shakespearean plays are produced today, there exists the possibility that the director will choose to "modernize" the drama, to set the production in contemporary times. The director may change the location, the characters, the language, the scenes; any aspect of the play may be altered to create a production that reflects a contemporary setting. The seductive nature of visual images may consequently draw film audience away from a critical dialogue with the film's representation of the playtext. However, it is important to examine these changes, as they reflect the film director's interpretation of the original work and shows how the modernization of a Shakespearean playtext contributes to its meaning.[5]

In his 1996 production of *Romeo and Juliet*, Baz Luhrman modernizes the play, changing the characters, setting, scenes, and various other details, while retaining the original language of Shakespeare's script. By modernizing Shakespeare's playtext, Luhrman places the film in a context more readily interpreted by the contemporary American audience, yet preserving the essence of the playtext.

In this production, the tragedy no longer takes place in Verona, Italy, but in Verona Beach, California, an urban center of skyscrapers. Mantua, to which Romeo is exiled, is not a neighboring city, but is instead a desert wasteland full of mobile homes. The Capulets and Montagues are not royal nobility, but capitalist powers, competing

corporations, each with a sky-scraper topped with the family name. The Capulets are Hispanic, most notably Tybalt and Capulet himself. The patriarch often appears drunk and physically assaults the women in his life when they do not follow his wishes. Tybalt and his companions have neatly trimmed facial hair and dress in black and leather, with silver-heeled boots and images of the Virgin Mary on pistol butts, clothing, and other possessions. The Montagues are all Caucasians with buzz cuts and Hawaiian shirts. Mercutio, Romeo's best friend, is black and in the carnival scene appears in drag, facial hair intact. Moreover, there are suggestions that Mercutio is himself in love with Romeo.

These representations of character and setting clearly bring this story of two ill-fated lovers into the twentieth century. The warring nobility are now warring economic and racial powers, whose conflicts have taken the form of gang warfare. This indeed seems a viable modern interpretation of Shakespeare's story. This translation of dueling nobility into gang warfare explains why two prominent families "each alike in dignity" [act 1, chorus, line 1] would treat each other with such violence. Gang warfare appears the only modern justification for the two family's inexplicable resort to violence each time they meet. Indeed, in the most murderous act of the play Benvolio says to Mercutio, "I pray thee, good Mercutio, let's retire: / The day is hot, the Capulets abroad, / And, if we meet, we shall not scape a brawl" [3.1.1-3].

That these conflicts be shaped by racial divisions is also appropriate to the late twentieth century. Gangs are popularly associated with race and the economics of culture. In an urban center like California, where whites, blacks, and Latinos of all classes mix, it makes sense that this conflict might be racial. However, Luhrman takes this a step further, showing that the violence is not simply racial, but a cultural economic and social power struggle.

The cultural divide is further illustrated by the difference in the younger members of the Montague and Capulet households. The characterizations of both families are so extreme as to approach parody. For example, the Montagues are, with the exception of Mercutio, the very vision of white Southern California -- complete with buzz-cuts and loud Hawaiian shirts. They present a homogenous view of Americans as blond, blue-eyed surfer boys. By contrast, the Capulet family nurse has a heavy Latino accent not present in other members of the family, aside from the father. More visually striking is Tybalt's dress and physical appearance, with his dark curly hair, extremely white teeth, silver toed boots, and enamel-handled guns in their hip holsters.

Luhrman's decision to update the play in this manner certainly makes sense; the modernized elements all work together. However, his casting also adds to the nature of the conflicts in Shakespeare's playtext. Shakespeare never establishes a reason for the families' feud, which

implies that there is no defensible reason for this deadly conflict. Luhrman fleshes out the conflict left undefined by Shakespeare. Additionally, by emphasizing the differences of race and culture between the two families to the point of parody, Luhrman accentuates the futility behind the conflict.

Interestingly enough, Mercutio is allied with both the Montagues and the Prince, who is also black. This divided conflict may not be readily apparent in the playtext, but Luhrman again uses race as a method for illuminating latent tension. In the late twentieth century, people of color are often set in opposition to other people of color, in order to divide loyalties and prevent cohesion. By casting both Mercutio and the Prince as black, Luhrman emphasizes Mercutio's divided loyalty. Mercutio is socially part of the Montague clan, and therefore owes them some allegiance, and yet he has kinship ties to the Prince. He has no quarrel himself with the Capulets, and yet the conflict between the Capulets and Montagues forces him to choose which clan to side with, while at the same time trying to maintain the lawfulness required by his kinship with the Prince.

The casting and setting are not the only things which are modernized. The swords so present in the original version are replaced in this version by revolvers. However, close-ups of the weapons reveal the words "Sword 9mm" along the side of one, with "Longsword" and

"Dagger" as brand names of other weapons. The potential duel between Mercutio and Tybalt would have taken place with a revolver. The weapons are prepared with one bullet each. The battle of the opening scene is performed via gunfire as well. Once again Shakespeare's play-text is rendered in a twentieth century context. The modern day Capulets and Montagues are just as willing as ever to engage in duels. The weapons are all that has changed. Luhrman makes sure the audience understands this point by directing several close-ups shots to the weapon brand names.

Automobiles also play a subtle role in this production. The cars all have personalized license plates. Mercutio's plate shows his own name, while the plates of the Capulet and Montague boys read, respectively, "CAP 005" and "MON 005". The heads of each family are often shown riding in the back of chauffeured limos. When Romeo slays Tybalt, he first crashes his car into Tybalt's, causing Tybalt's to overturn. Automobiles are an important sign of modern affluence and an integral element of present-day urban America. They serve to illuminate the economic battle represented in the film, much like Branagh's horses detail the gender differences in *Much Ado About Nothing.* The only people seen driving these cars, notably, are men. Matriarchs are shown in their chauffeured sedans but only in subordinate background positions. Their husbands occupy the foreground and are the source of the action. The

physical placement of men in the foreground in automobile shots is a direct reflection of the power men hold in society. The men are shown as involved with the automobiles, indicating that they control the social power these cars represent. In the cars, as in life, the women are merely along for the ride. As in *Much Ado About Nothing*, the society prescribes gender roles. The play's primary couple of Romeo and Juliet make an attempt at gender equality but this play is a tragedy and, unlike *Much Ado About Nothing*, these attempts fail and death results.

Luhrman also alters the format of critical scenes. Two of the best-known scenes in *Romeo and Juliet* are the balcony scene and the crypt scene. Luhrman changes both. In the playtext, Romeo climbs the garden wall of the Capulet estate, ending up in the orchard. Benvolio and Mercutio attempt to call him back, but to no avail [2.1]. Once in the orchard, Romeo spies Juliet in her window, talking to herself [2.2]. The resulting action is legendary: Romeo climbs a trellis to converse with his love. They exchange a kiss before he flees into the night. Whenever this scene is represented in modern culture, be it in painting, high school drama, community theater, or television sit-com, the balcony scene is a division of the speakers, with Juliet above and Romeo below.

In Luhrman's version, this famous scene takes place not on a balcony and trellis, but in a swimming pool. Romeo leaps from Mercutio's car as it leaves the Capulet estate. The walls Romeo scales

lead not into a stately orchard, but into a courtyard, where he is constantly startled by motion-sensitive lighting. When he recites the famous lines: "Soft! what light through yonder window breaks?" [2.2.2], Juliet can not yet be seen. When she exits her room, she descends to ground level. When Romeo first speaks to her, she is startled, and the two of them fall into the pool. Needless to say, there is no pool in Shakespeare's version. There are, nevertheless, elements of the original in this version; Romeo must still scale the courtyard wall, and when Juliet leaves, he climbs the mock trellis along the wall to kiss her through the second story railing. However, the majority of their memorable lines are delivered in the pool, where the two lovers are on equal ground.

This new twist offers an interesting interpretation of this scene. Rather than Romeo addressing Juliet above him on the balcony, like Rapunzel's prince climbing the tall tower, this Romeo meets his Juliet on equal footing, (like Beatrice and Benedick in Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing.*) In the play-text, the genders are not equal. This inequality was expressed through the physical distance of the two characters. The woman, like Petrach's Laura, was on a pedestal, or a balcony, and is the one who is sought out. The male, on the other hand, had the social power, and the power to do his own seeking. The Chorus to Act 2 states that, while Romeo, "a foe" has difficulty accessing Juliet, she has "means

much less / To meet her new-beloved any where" [act 2, chorus, lines 11-12]. However difficult things are for Romeo, Juliet, a female, has far fewer options.

In this version, however, Romeo and Juliet have the potential to be equal. Juliet comes down from her room without being called forth by Romeo. The dialogue between the lovers is conducted while they are standing face to face in a pool. This placement of the two characters on the same physical plane offers an image of gender equality.

The pool setting also provides a critique of the male-driven, corporate culture that is responsible for the inter-family violence. The lovers' immersion in water suggests a return to a womb-like state, a state of peace and innocence. This is also necessarily a feminine image. The safety and protection of the water is in direct opposition to the outside corporate power struggle. Luhrman has already established the Verona Beach setting as a male-dominated landscape. The pool is one of the few places where the two lovers can openly express their love and desire for unity.

These representations of Shakespeare's play are all consistent with the transformation from the Verona, Italy of the past and the Verona Beach, California of the present. However, the changed scene also reflects a change in social standing. Women are now, theoretically, equal partners in heterosexual relationships. Luhrman acknowledges this

change with the transformed locale. In Shakespeare's playtext, this scene addresses issues of gender inequality. By altering this scene, Luhrman allies gender with race as a contributing factor in the coming tragedy. While Romeo and Juliet's parents seem content to remain in unequal gender roles, with the females visibly subservient to the men, the young lovers are willing to embrace gender equality much as they embrace racial equality. The tragedy of their deaths is not simply the deaths of two lovers, but the deaths of a potential future of gender and racial equality.

Like the balcony scene, the final death scene is also altered. In the playtext, Romeo kills Paris on his way to the tomb. Upon seeing Juliet, he makes his last speeches and dies as Friar Lawrence encounters Balthasar outside the tomb. Friar Lawrence is present when Juliet wakes from the effects of the sleeping potion. Fearful of having his role in the plot revealed, a noise frightens him away from Juliet's side, and it is when she is then left alone that Juliet takes her own life. [5.3]

In Luhrman's version, Romeo's path to the tomb is a police chase, complete with helicopter. He takes a hostage to gain access to the tomb. In the tomb, while Romeo is making his last speeches, Juliet is in the stages of waking. The audience sees her fingers twitch and her head move. Romeo sees none of this. As he prepares to take the poison he has procured, Juliet awakens completely. She sits up and brushes his

cheek just as Romeo swallows the poison. Romeo does not die immediately. He and Juliet are awake together as the poison takes effect. Indeed, Romeo remains conscious to deliver his final line, "Thus with a kiss I die" [5.3.122] in a new context. In the playtext, it is Romeo who kisses the still-sleeping Juliet as he dies. In this film, it is Juliet who gives this final kiss. She watches as Romeo dies helplessly in front of her. After his final breaths, she takes her own life, not with Romeo's dagger but, using his handgun, with a single shot to the left temple.

The original scene as written is quite traumatic. Through miscommunication, Romeo believes his bride is dead and poisons himself. When Juliet awakens, she sees her dead husband and stabs herself. It is tragic for one lover to find the other dead. It is more tragic for one lover to watch the other die a death that could have been prevented if events had not gone awry. In Luhrman's version, the tension is heightened and the drama made more intense to suit the sensationalist tastes of the modern film audience.

The changes in the final scene between the lovers are, however, significant beyond a simple appeal to the nail-biting tastes of the modern film audience. As in the altered balcony scene, this scene once again puts the lovers on equal footing. In the original script, the lovers are once again separated, not by physical space, but by time. Each dies separately. In this version, their deaths are more simultaneous. Juliet is

awake while Romeo is dying. While Juliet does kill herself after Romeo's death, in this version most of her speeches are given as he is dying and still sharing the same temporal space with her. In the playtext, these speeches would have been made after Romeo had already vacated that temporal space. Once again, Luhrman not only changes one of the most memorable scenes of Shakespeare's play, but also alters the implications of the scene for gender relations. The two lovers deliver the majority of their last lines together, emphasizing the potential for equality they represent. In the end, however, Romeo does precede Juliet in death, thus restoring the temporal inequality. Luhrman uses the deaths of Romeo and Juliet to indicate the end of potential gender equality.

There is one final element of the visual text that offers the opportunity for additional social commentary. During the melee of Act 1, the film is paused periodically to frame a particular character as their name and significance to the plot is listed across the bottom of the screen. In this fashion the audience is introduced to Mercutio and Benvolio as Romeo's friends, Tybalt as "King of the Cats", and Mr. and Mrs. Montague and Capulet. These freeze frames would be difficult to duplicate in the theater. In addition, the captions accompanying each character have the feel of credits. It is interesting to note that these "credits" do not actually reveal the names of the actors. In fact, they most closely resemble the dramatis personae at the beginning of

Shakespeare's playtext. In this way, Luhrman integrates an element from the original playtext into what is clearly a film format. This technique also gives Luhrman the chance to introduce his characters as he wants them to be read: wild boys in cars and stiff family heads in the back of sedans. Luhrman thus lays out from the beginning the social role of each character, emphasizing the racial and gender roles he plans to focus on in his interpretation of Shakespeare's play.

Luhrman's film employs many recent cinematic techniques, eliciting numerous comparisons to MTV. Consequently, as in Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing*, there a danger of being seduced by the pace and power of the images into simply accepting what Luhrman offers us uncritically. However, an active dialogue with the film allows the audience to observe and evaluate social and cultural issues raised by Luhrman's handling of the material and examine how these issues contribute to an understanding of Shakespeare's playtext. There are significant potential layers of meaning that would be lost without this careful reading of the visual text. However, neither Luhrman nor Branagh offer complete solutions to the contradictions in the playtexts.

For example, Luhrman offers a re-interpretation of the Capulet-Montague conflict as gang warfare between two culturally different economic powers. This appears to resolve the question of the family feud, yet Luhrman raises other questions. Juliet Capulet, daughter of

the Latino household, is blond and blue-eyed, raising the question of how Luhrman imagines racial identity.

Branagh, likewise, offers contradiction in his re-interpretation of *Much Ado About Nothing.* The overall argument of his production is one of gender equality. Still, Margaret's position in the plot contributes a great deal of interpretive difficulty. While Hero and Beatrice represent the nobility of women, Margaret appears to portray their ignobility. Branagh's Margaret, although not intending any specific harm, is quite free with her affections, easily swayed by men's desires, and extremely fearful of male authority. In short, Margaret is the very picture of the unreliable woman, the very image Branagh denies in the remainder of the film.

In the twentieth century, directors have moved beyond trying to stage the "correct" Shakespeare, and instead are actively seeking out new interpretations of the playtext. Indeed, "To confine the plays of such an author to a single permanent genuine meaning is not only unnecessary; it is now positively wrong; it is in fact not genuine."[6] To ignore the significance of the twentieth century director's reinterpretation of Shakespeare's playtext is to assume that the modern director's reading of the playtext is equivalent to Shakespeare's intent. In reality, because Shakespeare's intentions are inaccessible to us beyond the various playtexts he left us, the interpretations presented by modern directors

offer us a place to begin the necessary task of interpretation Shakespeare's work demands. Evaluating the interpretive possibilities in modern representations of Shakespeare's works is critical to participation in the on-going dialogue with Shakespeare's playtexts.

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[1] Richardson, Robert, *Literature and Film*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969. p21.

[2] Altshuler, Thelma and Richard Paul Janaro, *Responses to Drama: An Introduction to Plays and Movies*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967. p73.

[3] Lucking, David, "Bringing Deformed Forth: Engendering Meaning in *Much Ado About Nothing*," *Renaissance Forum*, vol 2, n1, Spring 1997. www.hull.ac.uk/Hull/EL_Web/renforum/v2no1/lucking.html

[4] for feminist readings on sex and cinema, please see:
De Laureates, Teresa, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
and
Mulvey, Laura, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen*, Autum 1975, v16 n3. p.6-18.

[5] Leong, Anthony, *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet Movie Review*, 1997. users.aol.com/aleong1631/romeo.html

[6] Taylor, Gary, Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present. New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989. p.311.

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