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FEMALE VISUALIZATION IN SCREEN ADAPTATIONS OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS *ROMEO AND JULIET* AND *KING LEAR*

This paper explores the evolution of female character portrayals in three adaptations of Shakespeare's works: Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet* (1996), and the Royal Shakespeare Company's televised production of *King Lear* (2008). By examining visual representations, characterizations, and thematic explorations, the study investigates how societal changes and feminist discourse have influenced these adaptations. Zeffirelli's Juliet embodies innocence and traditional femininity, whereas Luhrmann's Juliet is assertive and empowered, reflecting contemporary gender dynamics. Similarly, the *King Lear* adaptation highlights the complexities of Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia within a patriarchal context, showcasing their struggles for power and agency. The comparative analysis reveals how these adaptations reimagine Shakespeare's heroines, emphasizing the shift from traditional gender roles to more dynamic and empowered female characters, mirroring societal transformations and the ongoing relevance of Shakespearean drama in contemporary storytelling.

Keywords: film adaptations, Shakespeare, female characters, gender roles

1. Introduction

Across generations and mediums, Shakespeare's timeless plays have not only endured but also evolved through various adaptations, offering new perspectives on his iconic characters and narratives. Among these adaptations, the cinematic interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet* by Franco Zeffirelli (1968) and Baz Luhrmann (1996), as well as the televised production of *King Lear* by the Royal Shakespeare Company for British Channel 4 in 2008, stand as examples of the continuous fascination with Shakespearean drama. Each of these productions not only captures the essence of its source material but also reimagines its characters and themes for contemporary audiences. This paper's aim is a comparative exploration of the portrayal of female characters in these adaptations and the way in which they changed under the influence of societal changes as well as feminism.

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Starting from the sixties, Franco Zeffirelli's film *Romeo and Juliet* presents Juliet as a young and innocent character, navigating the complexities of love and familial conflict in Renaissance Verona, primarily presented in the context of her relationships with other characters. Conversely, Baz Luhrmann's modern adaptation places Juliet into the fast-paced world of contemporary urban life, recontextualizing her struggles within the MTV generation. Julia becomes more rebellious, assertive and direct. Meanwhile, the Royal Shakespeare Company's televised production of *King Lear*, by director Trevor Nunn, offers a fresh interpretation of Shakespeare's tragic tale, with Ian McKellen's portrayal of Lear. Within this adaptation, the portrayal of the female characters of Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia provides an insight into examining gender dynamics and agency in a patriarchal society.

Through an analysis of visual representations, characterizations, and thematic explorations, this paper examines ways in which these adaptations reimagine Shakespeare's heroines within the constraints of their respective cinematic contexts. By examining the intersection of feminist discourse and Shakespearean drama in these adaptations, we aim to uncover the interpretive possibilities of Shakespeare's works in contemporary storytelling. Therefore, the most suitable theoretical framework for the analysis is presentism, which focuses on how a literary text is interpreted at the present moment. Presentism is defined as: "a theoretical and critical strategy of interpreting Shakespeare's texts in relation to contemporary political, social, and economic ideologies, discourses, and events" (GAJOWSKI 2010: 675). Film adaptations offer a unique perspective on Shakespeare's plays from a particular moment in time.

2. Romeo and Juliet

The tragic love story of star-crossed lovers has captivated audiences for centuries, inspiring numerous adaptations across various mediums. Among the most renowned are the films by Franco Zeffirelli (1968) and Baz Luhrmann (1996) of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. These adaptations not only retell the timeless tale of forbidden love but also offer distinct visual interpretations that resonate with different generations of viewers, either with the post-Vietnam War generation or the MTV generation in the nineties.

The brief plot of the play and the movies is the following. The city of Verona is disturbed by the conflict between the houses of Montague and Capulet. Romeo Montague falls in love with 14-year-old Juliet and, not knowing that she is Capulet's daughter, he starts courting her. Deeply in love, Romeo and Juliet persuade Friar Laurence to marry them in secret. After Juliet's cousin Tybalt has killed his friend, Romeo takes his revenge by killing Tybalt. For this offense, Romeo is banished from the city of Verona. After a few misunderstandings, both Romeo and Juliet tragically kill themselves.

Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* was one of the most successful screen adaptations of Shakespeare's play. The extremely young Romeo and Juliet (Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey were sixteen and fifteen) gave a beautiful performance. In Franco Zeffirelli's cinematic adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet emerges as a character whose portrayal intertwines innocence with determination, reflecting the complexities of Shakespeare's original creation. Zeffirelli's Juliet captures the youth and naivety of the character, yet also accentuates her evolving strength in the face of adversity. Moreover, she reflects the power that women of that age have gained. The scene in which she orders Romeo to keep in

touch with her every day nicely illustrates this (PLATZEROVÁ 2012: 48).

Another female character, Lady Capulet is presented very interestingly, as an angry-looking, powerful woman who controls everything. Her importance is shown in frequent close-ups of her face and constant focus on her reactions and emotions. Her gaze at Tybalt during Capulet's feast implies that they are having an affair, a relationship which is made more explicit upon Tybalt's death when she displays an unnatural grief. The Nurse, on the other hand, is a smiling, talkative, warm-hearted lady who shows great affection towards Juliet.

Returning to Juliet, Olivia Hussey gives a stunning performance for such a young actress. There is an innocence and purity to her performances. The violent encounter with her father and the courage with which she faces Friar Laurence's plan are all carried out with conviction. Juliet expresses her emotions such as passion and anger intensely, however, in many scenes, she seems like a silent and voiceless girl. Hussey dresses either in red or grey, and simple patterns and pearls emphasize her long hair and beauty. In the balcony scene, she is in her nightgown and looks very sensual. In this scene, we can see greater passion and desire in comparison to Lurhmann's adaptation. She is usually shot from a wider angle displaying her lavish Renaissance dresses, and this is combined with the close-up of her face and eyes. In this movie, however, Juliet is usually in the same shot with someone else, except when she is with Romeo, and in these moments, the director focuses on her primarily. Visually, the most interesting scene is the moment when the lovers see each other at the feast for the first time, and they are looking for each other through the dancing guests. When they start dancing, the camera spins and follows their movement of joy and love.

In the film, different camera shots allow the viewer to understand the emotions portrayed in the last scene when Romeo and Juliet die. In his adaptation, Zeffirelli uses the camera's ability to direct the viewer's attention to very specific things. For example, a long shot from the side provides an overview of the part of the scene inside the tomb as seen in Picture 1. Viewers see Juliet's still form and Romeo's anguished face as he speaks to her. Then, the camera moves to a close-up of Romeo's face as he sobs and drinks the poison. Next, viewers see the extreme close-up of Juliet's left hand—the same one Romeo kissed as he died—and see how it stirs with life. The camera moves back to show Juliet's discovery of Romeo dead by her side. She then stabs herself and rests her head on Romeo's chest. By concentrating on the deaths of Juliet and Romeo, Zeffirelli creates an emotionally powerful scene that expresses the heart of Shakespeare's famous tragedy. Zeffirelli's treatment of this ancient tale of love allows the viewer to fully experience the tragedy of these "star-crossed lovers".



Picture 1. *Olivia Hussey and Leonard Whiting in Romeo and Juliet*

Among contemporary commercial filmmakers, only Baz Luhrmann in *Romeo + Juliet* succeeded in placing Shakespeare into the era of postmodernism. This film loses nothing of the original's beauty while incorporating modern taste for fast-moving, spectacular visual and musical effects. Luhrmann's modern adaptation shows Romeo (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Juliet (Claire Danes) within the violent and superficial society of Verona Beach. *Romeo + Juliet* sets the play in a modern Verona Beach placed in the Latino culture. Luhrmann has created a world in which the extreme wealth of the two families is evident in the clothes and lifestyle of their younger generation. They wear expensive outfits, drive fancy sports cars, and have big guns.

The director constructs and deconstructs the play's traditional appearance into something new and fresh. Capulet's physical violence with his disobedient daughter, the feud between the two families, guns and drugs, and Christian symbols, all emphasize the attractiveness of this movie. "Darkly parodic visual images and scenes link love with the violence that will destroy it, foreshadow tragedy, and characterize the tragedy of love" (TATSPAUGH 2000: 143). The director captures the audience's attention through the use of cinematic techniques such as slow motion shots, low angle shots, and close-ups. Moreover, Luhrmann experiments with different music genres, including dark dramatic opera and soft melodic instrumental pieces.

Juliet's character is portrayed in a manner that resonates with feminist discourse. Shakespeare's Juliet, as depicted in the 1597 tragedy, challenges societal norms and patriarchal structures through her actions and decisions, particularly in her assertion of agency in matters of love and marriage. Building upon this foundation, Luhrmann's portrayal of Juliet in his film adaptation emphasizes her agency and empowerment in the face of oppressive gender roles and familial expectations.

When the older generation is concerned, Gloria Capulet appears as Cleopatra at the masquerade ball, which matches the fact that she is a self-centered woman, obsessed with power. Her appearance also looks grotesque while she is wearing her stocking cap and lingerie at the beginning of the film. This initial scene is shot in fast-moving images and her speech is quick and seems fast-forwarded. One of the possible reasons for this is

the fact that she took a drug pill and another one is to make her opposite from Juliet who is shot at a much slower pace. On the other hand, the Nurse is stricter than the one in Zeffirelli's version and is portrayed as a Latino woman and Juliet's voice of reason. She is also a plump woman whose Spanish accent fits her into the stereotype of a Latino housemaid.

Danes makes a wonderful Juliet, merging strength and vulnerability. At the masquerade ball, Juliet, from the moment she appears, is the picture of purity, spontaneity, and youthfulness. Furthermore, Juliet's costume is that of an angel, with straight hair and a white dress, to symbolize her purity. Her scenes are shot in slow motion as opposed to other parts of the party which are shot in a much more rapid movement. One of the most beautiful scenes in the movie is the moment the star-crossed lovers see each other for the first time. At the point of meeting, Romeo and Juliet are separated by a large blue fish tank. Everything is calm and peaceful. The music suddenly changes into romantic, and the camera moves slowly with close-ups of their faces. Deep blue water and soft pastel colors of pink and blue all create the effect of romance. Both Romeo and Juliet's faces are zoomed in to help the audience acquire an understanding of the deep love both characters have fallen in like in Picture 2.



Picture 2. *Meeting of Romeo and Juliet at the fish tank*

Both lovers possess stillness, simplicity, and serenity, which Luhrmann conveys by filming their scenes in longer sequences and by contrasting their love with the absence of love in Verona Beach. Claire Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio have great chemistry and speak their lines with passion. The famous balcony scene shows Romeo and Juliet pledging their love for each other after they both fall into the swimming pool. To show their devotion to each other, Luhrmann constantly switches the camera from one character to the other. However, in the wedding ceremony, they are in the same shot together. Their consummation of love is wonderfully portrayed in the scene with sheets when they joyfully smile and enjoy their love. However, as soon as somebody else comes into the room, like the Nurse, the camera movement shifts from slow to fast pace.

Juliet is not an ordinary girl; she questions things, speaks her mind, and seems very determined. Her lack of respect for authority is shown through her relationship with Lady Capulet. An important moment in the movie is captured in the violent scene with her father, who threatens and yells at Juliet while the camera turns and jerks constantly. Her father's face is zoomed in when he speaks of Juliet being still a stranger to the world, which implies that she is naive and could be easily seduced. In other scenes, there is an emphasis on her torso and face and in some scenes angelic lights from the candles sur-

round her. Her clothes are simple in the movie; in the beginning, she appears with angelic wings and a simple white dress, and throughout the movie, she wears a simple T-shirt and jeans. Her serene nature is emphasized with slow music and camera movement which is contrasted with fast-moving images of Verona Beach.

The only time she wears black is when Romeo's banished, so she comes into the church wearing a black veil displaying her grief and a gun. The scene is shot in a dark and gloomy atmosphere and her anger is emphasized by quick camera movements. In comparison to Hussey's Juliet, she is much more visually simple but wonderfully convincing and lovely. The death scene is particularly powerful. In a big church, its aisles filled with neon crosses, the camera focuses on hundreds of candles and a bier with Juliet. To make the death of Romeo and Juliet seem like an inevitable thing, the director sets the scene at a church filled with glowing candles and large crosses to symbolize a higher power. Juliet lies on a high altar surrounded by flowers and candles, as shown in Picture 3. "Just as Juliet's beauty is depicted here as the lively mask of death, so too, it is implied, the mask of death and night, like the Capulet tomb, envelops a hidden luminosity and beauty" (BERRY 1999: 88). In the end, the director shows the scenes of their love where Romeo and Juliet are falling into the swimming pool, kissing, bubbles rushing around them. The image freezes to emphasize the strength of their love. However, for the director, "the death of the beautiful woman is neither redemptive nor a glorious apotheosis" (RUTTER 2000: 258). The death scene gets replayed to make it even more terrible. In the end, they are presented as two dead bodies in an evening news segment.



Picture 3. *Juliet's death scene in Romeo+Juliet.*

Although some critics have described Luhrmann's Juliet as passive in comparison to Zeffirelli's mostly due to the omission of her lines (SCOTT 2008), others have claimed that her true nature can be seen through her actions (PLATZEROVÁ 2012: 34). Indeed, when compared to Romeo, Luhrmann's Juliet is much more agentive. She is the one who takes control over their lives. "Romeo gladly lets Juliet steer him and their relationship, and she uses her inclination to masculine performance to help her navigate her closed patriarchal world and exert her will where she sees fit" (MATHIS 2014: 86). In conclusion, when we compare the two films, we can see that the older version presents Juliet as a traditional feminine woman whose rebellion is more subtle and nuanced. The story's focus is not on her, but rather on her and Romeo's relationship. The newer adaptation represents Juliet as a more edgy, assertive character placed in a wider social context and a culture of violence. She is the proof of how the traditional gender roles in society have

changed and how women have become more dominant both in life and in art.

3. King Lear

Another adaptation of Shakespeare's work that will be analyzed in this paper is the contemporary theatrical adaptation of *King Lear*. Even though the focus is on the themes of men and power, the female characters in this play are depicted in the context of filial obedience and expectations set towards women in the context of marriage and family. *King Lear* is a play about a world left at the mercy of egoistic old men, who are deaf to those who love them, and their vicious children, who crave power and possession. It also represents a road to revelation and truth, which is paid at an extremely high price. In summary, an old king Lear decides to divide his kingdom between his three daughters but to do this, his daughters are obliged to express their love for their father. After the youngest daughter Cordelia fails to express her emotions in a way the king wants, he decides to banish and disown her. This capricious decision will lead to tragic consequences that will result in war and disaster for Lear's entire family. This is a play whose main themes are filial disobedience, egoism, and power, which finally result in madness and death.

In contrast to Shakespeare's other plays such as *Hamlet*, *Othello*, or *Romeo and Juliet*, there are not many film adaptations of this play, although it is one of the big four tragedies. However, one of the most recent and most interesting adaptations is the production of the Royal Shakespeare Company, which created a three-hour television film starring Ian McKellen as Lear. It was produced by the British Channel 4 in 2008, and the director was Trevor Nunn. Although it is very theatrical and gives an impression of watching a play, the show included some additional sets that bring it closer to a real-world setting. The main star is Sir Ian McKellan who gave a stellar performance as a grief-stricken and mad king, who paradoxically wants to divide his kingdom and take all the responsibility off his shoulders while retaining all his power.

We will focus primarily on the portrayal of female characters: Goneril played by Frances Barber, her sister Regan played by Monica Dolan and the youngest sister Cordelia played by Romola Garai. All the three actresses gave a powerful performance. Besides their acting, costumes, as well as the setting, contribute to the portrayal of their characters and the dark and gloomy atmosphere of the play. Common ground in all of Shakespeare's plays is that feminine characters, even the major ones, occupy only a small portion of the plot and only have a few appearances and *King Lear* is no exception to this. Women are marginalized, in their life as well as their death.

When Goneril and Regan are concerned, they are sexualized women desperate to be freed from their father's influence as they crave Edmund's charm. This sexuality is shown particularly with Goneril, who wears tight corsets and red clothes which symbolize passion. She is also shot in seductive scenes with Edmund, who seems much younger than her. We can see her as a confident and mature woman who is capable of killing her sister to reach her goal. Her facial expressions and her black dress both reflect dishonesty in the first scene. Despite her grandiose words, there is a close-up of her fake smile as she talks about her love for her father. Only when Lear visits her in her castle does she reveal her true nature. Annoyed by his actions, she yells and defies her father. Her facial expressions that vary from disgust to anger are presented in a close-up. When Lear speaks to her, she seems blurry and small in the background and we look at her from Lear's per-

spective of a treacherous daughter.

Monica Dolan plays Regan powerfully. Regan is portrayed as elegantly dressed, combining sensual silk and dark velvet. Despite the fake smiles and grandiose words, the close-up of her facial expressions reveals true anger and resentment towards her father and sisters, who are shot together in a wide angle. In that initial scene, we can easily notice her nervous facial expressions although the primary focus of the camera is on King Lear. When she is with her husband, she is also not in focus and they are usually shot together from a wider angle. Regan is a character who parallels her father's mental breakdown. Her madness is perfectly shown in the scene in which she tosses wine on Kent's face as he's locked into the stocks or her ecstasy when Gloucester is blinded. We can also see her viciousness when she yells and hysterically laughs at her father at the same time. Drunk on wine and power, she goes over to the captive Gloucester, where we can see her nervous and aggressive nature. In the end, when freed from the patriarchal influences of her father and husband, Regan becomes a stronger woman who even competes with her sister for Edmund's affections, but always seems undermined by her. Nunn successfully highlights jealousy as one of the play's strongest themes; an emotion that destroys not only Lear but most of the play's other characters too. What is particularly striking is that Regan's low self-esteem is in complete contrast to Goneril's authority, which we can see as soon as they are together in the shot, by camera focusing on Goneril. Regan is a woman who does not choose means to gain more power in this political and social wasteland, and Monica Dolan perfectly portrays her nervous and ambitious nature.

Romola Garai is a headstrong Cordelia, who, in Lear's eyes, makes the greatest mistake and that is the lack of filial obedience he demands from her. Her *nothing* wounds her father, who, in a child-like manner, wants her to quantify her love for him. She speaks her mind and laughs at the absurdity of being asked to measure her love for her father. In a white dress, she is a picture of innocence, beauty and charm, which the Duke of France notices instantly. Her difference from other characters is cinematically presented by placing her outside the group representing the court in a wide shot. This makes allusions to her honest and rebellious nature. However, when she expresses strong emotions and defies her father, the camera quickly moves from one character to another. Although she is one of the major characters, she has only a few appearances, at the very beginning of the play and at its very end.

The death scene where Lear laments over Cordelia's body is reproduced faithfully. McKellen as Lear appears holding a dead Cordelia in his arms. They are both dressed in white perhaps to indicate the spiritual purity of Cordelia in heaven. In these moments, the central focus of the camera is not on Cordelia, but on Lear's reaction and his grief. Her face is not even visible for most of the scene, just her hair and body. Even when the director films a wider angle, we look at her immortal body from a distance. Goneril and Regan's bodies are presented in the background, with just a few short glimpses of them. This adequately illustrates death as a gendered phenomenon in Shakespeare. Whereas male deaths are presented onstage, women mostly die offstage. However, before their deaths occur, women's corpses are returned onstage (RUTTER 2001: 4). Cordelia becomes a theater prop, belonging to "Lear's performance" (RUTTER 2001: 5). At the end of the play, Cordelia and her sisters, dead silent, replay the problems of female speech (RUT-

TER 2001: 17). Speechless, motionless, reduced by death, their bodies occupy a theatrical space (RUTTER 2001: 2).



Picture 4. Romola Garai, Monica Dolan, Ian McEllan and Frances Barber in *King Lear*.

In *King Lear*, the portrayal of female characters intersects with feminist discourse, offering an exploration of gender dynamics within Shakespeare's tragedy. Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia emerge as figures who navigate the constraints of a patriarchal society in distinct ways. The adaptation reframes their actions and motivations through a feminist lens, portraying their struggles against oppressive structures and expectations, especially female expectations from their families and society in general. This is particularly evident in the visual representation of the characters, where costume choices, body language, and staging serve to emphasize their agency and defiance against traditional gender roles. By presenting Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia as complex individuals with desires and ambitions, Channel 4's production challenges audiences to reconsider the traditional narrative of *King Lear* and engage with the feminist themes in the play's exploration of power, authority, and gender.

Conclusion

In the cinematic and theatrical adaptations, Shakespeare's heroines in *Romeo and Juliet* and *King Lear* reveal the evolution of gender dynamics and female agency. Through the lens of presentism, these adaptations offer nuanced portrayals that transcend traditional stereotypes and challenge societal norms, especially when considering the newer adaptations. The comparative analysis of Franco Zeffirelli's and Baz Luhrmann's interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet*, alongside the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *King Lear*, shows the enduring relevance of Shakespearean drama in contemporary storytelling. From Juliet's defiance of patriarchal constraints to the complex struggles of Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia against oppressive structures, these adaptations invite audiences to reconsider the roles of women in society and the complexities of their experiences.

As we consider the significance of these adaptations, it becomes evident that

Shakespeare's exploration of female characters is reimagined to reflect and criticize contemporary societal norms. It serves as a mirror where we can see the change in gender roles and the position of women, witnessing a shift from passive characters used only to emphasize the heroism of male characters to independent, more rebellious and lifelike characters. Women become active central characters whose position and role in society has drastically changed since the Shakespearean times.

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VIZUALIZACIJA ŽENSKIH LIKOVA U FILMSKIM ADAPTACIJAMA ŠEKSPIROVIH DRAMA "ROMEO I JULIJA" I "KRALJ LIR"

Rezime

Ovaj rad istražuje evoluciju prikaza ženskih likova u tri značajne adaptacije Šekspirovih dela: filmu "Romeo i Julija" Franka Zeffirelija (1968), filmu "Romeo+Julija" Baza Luhrmana (1996) i televizijskoj produkciji "Kralj Lir" Kraljevske Šekspirove kompanije (2008). Analizom vizuel-

nih prikaza, karakterizacija i tematskih aspekata, studija istražuje kako su društvene promene i feministički diskurs uticali na ove adaptacije. Zefirelijeva Julija oličava nevinost i tradicionalnu ženstvenost, dok je Lurmanova Julija asertivna i osnažena, odražavajući savremenu dinamiku rodni uloga. Slično, adaptacija "Kralja Lira" ističe složenost sestara Goneril, Regan i Kordelije unutar patrijarhalnog konteksta, prikazujući njihovu borbu za moć i agentivnost. Komparativna analiza otkriva kako ove adaptacije daju novi prikaz Šekspirovih heroína, naglašavajući prelazak sa tradicionalnih rodni uloga ka dinamičnijim i osnaženijim ženskim likovima, koji odražavaju društvene transformacije i relevantnost Šekspirove drame u savremenom pripovedanju.

Ključne reči: filmske adaptacije, Šekspir, ženski likovi, rodne uloge