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"What Kind of an Ending is That?" Adapting Shakespeare for a Young Audience: The Case of *Gnomeo and Juliet* (2011)

Abstract. The article discusses adapting William Shakespeare's plays for young viewers. It aims to present the adaptive strategies taken up by the creators of an animated feature film based on *Romeo and Juliet* and to discuss how the production engages its audience in a cultural dialogue. One of the main points of consideration is that adaptations of literary classics into film productions addressed to young audiences can be analyzed as enriching the source texts with new dimensions, which might shed a sometimes surprisingly new light on the source text. The genre-change-induced modifications and intertextuality of *Gnomeo and Juliet* (2011) are discussed, focusing on how the production maneuvers between the source text and requirements of the genre, on the dialogue it involves its viewers in, and on its possible cultural role.

Keywords: adaptation, *Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare, animated feature film, intertextuality

1. Introduction

William Shakespeare's plays belong to the literary classics most frequently adapted into film and television productions. Among film adaptations, we can find those that transpose the play into a new medium without any significant modifications to the setting, plot, characters, or the language of the play, and films that draw inspiration from the source text, explore the original central conflict, but alter the setting significantly and markedly modernize the characters and the language they speak. The latter group includes numerous productions, some of which do not even retain the titles of the source texts: e.g. *Kiss Me Kate* (dir. G. Sidney, 1953), *Throne of Blood* (dir. A. Kurosawa, 1957), *The Bad Sleep Well* (dir. A. Kurosawa, 1960), *West Side Story* (dir. R. Wise, J. Robbins, 1961), or *10 Things I Hate About You* (dir. G. Junger, 1996). Surprisingly or not, among the adaptations we can also find animated feature films. In 2011, Touchstone

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Pictures released a 3-D computer-animated film titled *Gnomeo and Juliet*, classified as a "romantic comedy," and loosely based on William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet.* It is one of numerous examples of adapting one of the Bard's plays into an animated film addressed to young audiences. However, *Romeo and Juliet* is the only tragedy that, in such an adaptation, turns into a comedy with a happy ending. Shakespeare's play about the star-crossed lovers, which in *Gnomeo and Juliet* features garden gnomes and other garden ornaments as members of the feuding communities, goes through a genre and medium change, acquires a different addressee but remains recognizable even to a moderately knowledgeable viewer. Robert Geal, in *Anamorphic Authorship in Canonical Film Adaptation: A Case Study of Shakespearean Films* (2019), calls such an adaptation an "állagmic" one since the modification concerns, in this case, location (the setting changes from "Shakespearean" to "ostensibly non-Shakespearean"), language (only minute parts of Shakespearean dialogue are preserved), and character. My considerations herein form an attempt to discuss the genre-change-induced modifications and intertextuality of the 2011 production, focusing on how it maneuvers between the source text and requirements of the genre, on the dialogue it involves its viewers in, and on its possible cultural role.

2. *Gnomeo and Juliet* in the context of other animated film adaptations of Shakespeare

Shakespeare's works have been introduced to young audiences and readers in various ways – through adaptations into comics, graphic novels, and films, including animated ones. The most popular animated films loosely based on *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet,* respectively, are Disney's *The Lion King* (1994) and *The Lion King*: *Simba's Pride* (1998). An interesting case is that of *Shakespeare: The Animated Tales* (also known as *The Animated Shakespeare*), a series of animated television films broadcast by BBC2 and S4C between 1992 and 1994, which includes twelve 25-minute adaptations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Tempest, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Twelfth Night, Richard III, The Taming of the Shrew, As You Like It, Julius Caesar, The Winter's Tale,* and *Othello.* Despite presenting abbreviated versions of the plays, the productions were critically acclaimed and have been used in schools as teaching aids. *Romeo and Juliet,* definitely one of Shakespeare's most popular plays, has three full-length animated feature film adaptations (besides the already mentioned Disney *The Lion King*: *Simba's Pride*), and those include *Romie-0 and Julie-8* (Canada 1978), *Romeo & Juliet: Sealed with a Kiss* (US 2006), and *Gnomeo and Juliet* (US 2011). Other plays of the Bard seem to be less popular among adaptors willing to address young audiences. Still, there is a Swedish-Norwegian 1989 animated adventure fantasy film titled *The Journey to Melonia: Fantasies of Shakespeare's 'The Tempest'* (in Swedish: *Resan till Melonia*) directed by Per Åhlin, and a 1959 Czechoslovak animated puppet film, *Sen noci svatojánské,* directed by Jiří Trnka, which is an adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The latter play has two more animated adaptations, namely *Strange Magic* (US 2015), described in one of the reviews as "a madcap fairy tale musical inspired by *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with popular songs from the past six decades used to help tell the tale of a colorful cast of goblins,

elves, fairies and imps, and their hilarious misadventures sparked by the battle over a powerful potion" (Graser), based on an idea by George Lucas, and *Bottom's Dream* (US 1983), an animated short directed by John Canemaker, showing events of the play from the point of view of Bottom.

Gnomeo and Juliet, the production on which this discussion focuses, was directed by Kelly Asbury, with the script authored by seven writers (the reason why some critics noted a certain excess in the content). It went a long way from the original idea of Rob Sprackling and John Smith, who sold the initial script to Disney. Due to several factors that complicated the production process, it took nearly ten years and seven more writers for the film to see daylight. The final product tells the story of two feuding communities of garden gnomes and other garden ornaments (identified as the blues and the reds), with the expected romantic storyline of the love at first sight sparked between Gnomeo Bluebury and Juliet Redbrick. Labeled by one of the internet reviewers ("Shakespeare Geek") as "West Side Toy Story," the film has a stellar vocal cast, including James McAvoy (Gnomeo), Emily Blunt (Juliet), Michael Caine (Lord Redbrick), Maggie Smith (Lady Bluebury), Patrick Stewart (William Shakespeare as an animated statue), Ozzy Osbourne (as a plastic deer), Jason Statham (as Tybalt, the bully) and Dolly Parton (as Dolly Gnome). Elton John was the executive producer and composed part of the music score, including the song "Hello, Hello," nominated for the Golden Globe Award for Best Original Song.

3. *Gnomeo and Juliet* as an "állagmic" adaptation: Modifications to the plot, setting, and characters

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as a tragedy ends with six deaths, including both protagonists. In the case of the animated adaptations of the play mentioned above, addressed to young viewers, a major change is that of the ending (except for the 1992 *Animated Tales*, which is a faithful but condensed retelling of the play) since their creators had to "keep daggers and poison and suicide out" (Asbury in Eisenberg), so as not to distract the young viewers. In her review, Roth Cornet sums up the concept of the ending as "the redirection of the hand of destiny (toward a more desired result) [that] is meant to lead us to an alternate, and more children's-film-friendly ending to the narrative—an ending which the filmmakers hope that some adults may also secretly prefer" (Cornet).

In *Gnomeo and Juliet,* the setting is contemporary Stratford-Upon–Avon, where the conflict is recreated between two feuding neighbors, Ms. Montague and Mr. Capulet. Their garden gnomes are the Blueburys and the Redbricks, and their feud mirrors that of their owners. Eventually, the conflict between the blues and the reds is aggravated so that both gardens are completely demolished with Terraferminator, an advanced lawnmower, whose functions include digging, clearing, mowing, and destruction. However, the very ending, showing a wedding-like scene, the feasting characteristic of the happy endings in Elizabethan comedies, shows the garden in a reconstructed shape. Although the demolition ends the feud between the communities of gnomes, we do not learn whether the owners buried the hatchet or not.

The modifications introduced in the process of the adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in this adaptation are determined, first of all, by the film's target audience. Instead of the adult audience for whom Shakespeare was writing, the recipients are primarily children. However, since the film has been advertised for family viewing, there is a level at which the message, the jokes, and numerous references to other texts of culture are addressed to adult viewers. It is worth noting that Shakespeare's play does have a comedy-like mood up to Tybalt's death in Act III, with some bawdy jokes that should not find their place in a production for young viewers. The adaptation remains in the comic mode throughout. Most of the jokes in *Gnomeo and Juliet* are created for the production and are addressed to children; all characters have comic features. Some of those features, such as Nanette's (the Nurse's equivalent), are rooted in the original play, where the Nurse brings certain comic relief (if only up to a particular point); others result from the fact that the characters are garden gnomes, with certain inherent limitations. Actual quotations from Shakespeare's play are used to amuse the knowing adult audience, and these will be discussed in detail later on.

Gnomeo and Juliet, despite being a 3-D computer-animated feature film, opens with a brief theatrical introduction, referring the viewers to the source text and giving them an illusion of being among the audience of an actual theater. The first scene shows a garden gnome introducing the story from the theater stage (we can see the curtain being drawn behind him and hear sounds coming off-screen—the unseen audience coughs, orchestral instruments are tuned up). Eventually, he is removed from the stage and thrown into a floor trap to prevent him from reading the whole Prologue. The gnome starts his speech with the following words:

> The story you are about to see
> has been told before. A lot.
> And now we are going to tell it again.
> But different.
> It's about two star-crossed lovers
> kept apart by a big feud.
> No one knows how this feud started,
> but it's all quite entertaining.
> Unfortunately, before we begin,
> there is a rather long, boring prologue,
> which I will read to you now.

He starts reading the actual source text, but interestingly enough, his disappearance prevents him from providing information about the star-crossed lovers' fate: the text of Shakespeare's Prologue is interrupted just before the fact that the lovers take their lives is revealed. Such an introduction alludes to the genre of the source text, refers directly to the story, and gives the film proper general context concerning the feud, but at the same time promises an alteration.

Once the unfortunate Prologue-reader is removed from the stage, the story proper begins, with the shift in the setting being introduced, as we see a semi-detached property located at Verona Drive in contemporary Stratford-Upon-Avon (the town name being confirmed later on by the destination board on a bus). In the new setting, the division between the feuding neighbors and their garden ornaments is conspicuously marked with red for Ms. Montague, her house decorations and garden ornaments, and blue for Mr. Capulet and the decorative elements of his property. The colors assigned to the feuding communities and the numbers of the two houses open a long list of intertextual references in the production. The division between the reds and the blues derives from the way Frank Zeffirelli used those colors in the costumes in his 1968 adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* (the same colors are used to differentiate members of the two families in *The Animated Shakespeare* of 1992).

The plot of the animated film centers on the conflict in the way the source text does. There are elements of the source text plot that remain unchanged: Gnomeo and Juliet meet for the first time in disguise (although not at a ball as Romeo and Juliet do), and members of the conflicted communities engage themselves in quite violent lawn mower races, which become an equivalent of the brawls the Montague and the Capulet male youth are involved in. Most of the source text's characters can be found in the adaptation: in addition to the two protagonists, there are their overprotective parents, though they are single (Lady Bluebury—Gnomeo's mother, and Lord Redbrick—Juliet's father), Tybalt, Paris, Benny (an amalgam of Mercutio and Benvolio), and Nanette (a frog fountain, an equivalent of the Nurse). Featherstone, a pink plastic flamingo found by Gnomeo and Juliet in the "old Laurence," the abandoned garden next door, can be read as a reference to Friar Laurence from the source text.

Similarly to the source text's Verona, the world of the garden gnomes is primarily male. However, Lady Bluebury is the head of the community of the blues, and, as in Shakespeare's play, it is a world in which the masculine concepts of honor, revenge, and pride are vital and lead to conflict and destruction. The same consistency with the world created by Shakespeare can be found in Lord Redbrick's urge to protect Juliet. Eventually, her father symbolically glues her to the pedestal she should be standing on as a garden ornament, from which she used to escape. Also, the secret union between Gnomeo and Juliet, signified by their plan to cultivate the abandoned garden together (the old Laurence), resembles Romeo and Juliet's union, followed in both stories by a tragic event (Tybalt's death) that ignites the feud and leads to open conflict. However, there is only one actual death in the animation, and it is Tybalt's: he is accidentally smashed during a mower race, competing against Gnomeo. There is also the motif of exile and assumed death, first of Gnomeo, then of both him and Juliet, but no suggestions of suicide are present. Hence, at the story level, Shakespeare's source text has been transformed into a story about the secret lives of garden ornaments, but also about requited love that blooms despite all obstacles.

As mentioned earlier, the adaptation modifies all the characters, but the way it modernizes Juliet to make her more relatable for the young viewers requires special attention. The heroine

is transformed into a modern, self-confident, and defiant girl, who strongly opposes her father's urge to protect her, stressing that she is "not delicate!" and cannot be imprisoned on the pedestal. Her adhesion to it results in her near destruction, as she cannot escape when danger comes. She is very fit, Gnomeo's equal both intellectually and physically, or sometimes even better than him (she manages to start the old mower while he cannot). Juliet's monologue (originally in Act II, Scene 2) is longer than in the play and other adaptations, and not interrupted by Gnomeo, as it is in the source text. She appears as a modern, rebellious girl who is eventually grounded by her father and saved by accident, not by Gnomeo, because even he cannot separate her from the pedestal to which she is glued. Paradoxically, it is the total destruction of the construction that frees her.

The adaptation offers an interesting variation on the ending of the source text. The Bard statue mentioned above becomes animated to get involved in a conversation with Gnomeo, who, exiled after Tybalt's being smashed, accidentally lands on the head of the statue. Gnomeo retells the events that have separated him from Juliet, which reminds the statue/Shakespeare of "another story," which shows "remarkable similarities" to that just presented by the gnome. The conversation between the two provides an opportunity for the statue to recount the original, tragic ending to Gnomeo and the viewers by Shakespeare's representative in the film. However, the tragic ending, with the two lovers dying, is criticized by the young gnome:

> Gnomeo: They both die?! What kind of an ending is that?
> Shakespeare: My dear boy, this is a tragedy.
> Gnomeo: Yeah, you're telling me, mate. It's rubbish!
> Shakespeare: "Rubbish"?
> Gnomeo: Gotta be a better ending than that!
> Shakespeare: I suppose that he could've made it back in time to avert disaster, but I like the whole death part better.

Due to the statue's vivid gesticulation, Gnomeo falls off but is saved by plastic Featherstone, and, informed by him about Juliet being in danger, he rushes to save her, bearing in mind the story told by the Bard as a warning. The adaptation's ending is a happy one, and, as Gnomeo stresses when he kisses Juliet, he prefers it that way. Thus, the conversation with the Bard provides information about the major change in the plot, in case young viewers might be tempted to treat *Gnomeo and Juliet* as a faithful introduction to the original play. The conversation between Gnomeo and the Bard's statue is analyzed by Peter Kirwan in his article "Framing the theatrical: Shakespearean film in the UK," with the conclusion that "[t]he staging by *Gnomeo and Juliet* of a negotiation between the cinematic interpretation and the statuesque tradition of Shakespeare offers a pleasing synecdoche for the history of UK Shakespeare film" (187).

4. *Gnomeo and Juliet* as "a mosaic of quotations"

As mentioned above, the animated adaptation includes many references, either direct or modified, from the source text and other plays of the Bard. The former connect the production with the source text and the latter amuse careful adult viewers. Two of the most memorable citations from *Romeo and Juliet* appear in the adaptation. The first one is unchanged, but first, we find it in an altered context: "Parting is such sweet sorrow" is said ironically by Nanette to Gnomeo when she pushes him out of the garden of the reds for his safety. The statement is repeated by Gnomeo while saying goodbye to Juliet later in the story: "The frog was right, parting is such sweet sorrow," which resembles the original context of the utterance from the source text.

Another element of the script that comes from the source text is a combination of two of Juliet's original speeches; in the animated film this takes the following form:

> O Gnomeo, Gnomeo,
> are we really doomed, Gnomeo,
> to never see each other again?
> Why must you wear a blue hat?
> Why couldn't it be red like my father,
> or... or green like a leprechaun?
> Or purple like, um... like, uh...
> like some weird guy?
> I mean, what's in a gnome? Because
> you're blue, my father sees red,
> and because I'm red, I'm feeling blue.

The above monologue precedes the scene which includes a visual reference to the balcony scene: Juliet is on the keep (her "pedestal") by the pool, in which Gnomeo eventually finds a temporary hiding place. Including the pool in the scene can be read as an allusion to "the balcony scene" in Baz Luhrman's *Romeo+Juliet* (1996), in which Romeo (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Juliet (Claire Danes) fall into a swimming pool. Romeo has to stay underwater for some time to avoid being detected by the guards. Gnomeo finds himself in the same situation.

The script includes passages or phrases from other plays by the Bard. One of them comes—in a modified form—from *Hamlet.* When Nanette says goodbye to Gnomeo as he leaves the reds' garden, her words echo those of Horatio to the dying Hamlet:

> Good night, sweet prince,
> and flights of angels ...
> or pigeons or sparrows or whatever.

Another example can be found in Lady Bluebury's order when the conflict between the reds and the blues aggravates: "Unleash the dogs of war!" The phrase "the dogs of war" is used by Marc Anthony in Act III of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar.*

For a careful, knowledgeable adult viewer, *Gnomeo and Juliet* becomes "a mosaic of quotations," to use Kristeva's phrase (37). The film provides multiple traces of other texts, references to Shakespeare's plays, as well as texts and representatives of popular culture.[2] The numbers of the warring neighbors' houses—one is marked 2B and the other 2B crossed out, presumably indicating "not 2B"—allude to the famous phrase from Hamlet's soliloquy. In the shed of the Laurence garden, where Gnomeo and Juliet secretly meet, there is a ticket stub from *As You Like It.* Juliet is glued to the keep with a substance called "Taming of the Glue." We can see trucks of "Rozencrantz & Guilderstern Movers" and "Tempest Teapots." There are references to the film *American Beauty* (1999, dir. Sam Mendes) when Nanette dreams of Paris, bathing in rose petals, and to *The Graduate* (1967, dir. Mike Nichols) when Featherstone, suffering the impact of Gnomeo's fall, cries: "One word! Plastic!" Some of the background characters look like the actors who voice them (for example, Tybalt, voiced by Jason Statham, and Dolly Gnome, voiced by Dolly Parton); the advertisement for Terrafirminator, the destructive lawn mower, is voiced by Hulk Hogan, a well-known American wrestler, while the statue of William Shakespeare speaks with the voice of Patrick Stewart, a well-known member of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

5. Conclusions

In his Introduction to the 1964 edition of *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, J. A. Bryant wrote: "Among professional scholars, the play has sparked less enthusiasm. … More than one scholarly critic has expressed misgivings about the emphasis on pathos, the absence of ethical purpose, and what appears to be a capricious shifting of tone…" (xxiii). When we look at the 2011 animated adaptation from that angle, we can be tempted to conclude that the modifications—the shift in the genre, with the story ending with "the triumph of young love" and a union between the two protagonists, and with "forgiveness and feasting all around," characteristic of Elizabethan comedies—make *Gnomeo and Juliet* appear more consistent in its tone than Shakespeare's play, which from the light tone of the first two acts turns into a grim tragedy in Acts III and IV.

It is interesting to reflect upon the potential impact of the film on its target audience. Children constitute, in this case, "the unknowing audience," to use Linda Hutcheon's term (390), becoming, through the film, introduced to the source text. The film was recommended, in the materials provided by Film Education within National Schools Film Week, for classroom use at Key Stages 1 and 2 (age 5-7), and as Abigail Rokison-Woodall puts it:

2 Discussions can be found on internet fora in which viewers exchange information about the references found, see e.g. https://www.filmboards.com/board/p/81334/

> It may be difficult to imagine children at Key Stage 1 discussing dramatic genres or having any interest in researching the life and times of a writer whose plays they are unfamiliar with; however, it is possible to see how an awareness among children that what they are watching is an adaptation (albeit a loose one) of a story by William Shakespeare may help to inspire a greater enthusiasm for, and interest in his drama when they do actually encounter it. (214)

The film does introduce two concepts that have general cultural or psychological significance: star-crossed lovers and love at first sight. The moral of the story is connected with the devastating effects of a feud, while the way the story resolves shows that the masculine urge for revenge (represented by Tybalt and Benny, and also by Gnomeo until he meets Juliet) brings destruction. The story could also provide the context for a classroom discussion of the harmful effects of prejudice. Therefore, we can assume that the production could become a gentle, albeit potentially challenging, introduction to the Bard's tragedy.

Eckart Voights-Virchrow, in his introduction to *Janespotting and Beyond: British Heritage Retrovisions Since the Mid-1990s,* refers to Shakespeare films as "crossover products" which are "syncretic in the sense that they fuse supposedly incongruous genres in a new blend" (20). *Gnomeo and Juliet* is a syncretic production that combines tragedy with comedy, and stage drama with animation. In Geoffrey Wagner's (1975) typology, the film would be classified as an analogy. The title suggests inspiration rather than reproduction, and from the very beginning we know that the well-known story will be told differently. In Wojciech Wierzewski's typology, suggested in *Film i literatura* (1983), that would count as a creative adaptation, creatively enriching the source text with variations. Whichever typology we decide to apply, *Gnomeo and Juliet* remains an apt example of an adaptation that, in a new form, emphasizes the cultural position of Shakespeare's play. Criticized by many adult viewers (55% of negative reviews out of 127 on Rotten Tomatoes) but enjoyed by children, the production remains an interesting example for analyzing and discussing the extent to which an adaptation can depart from the source text and still be considered its "version."

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