Power and Presentation: Comparing Juliet in Baz Luhrmann's William Shakespeare's *Romeo + Juliet* and William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

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Romeo and Juliet remains one of Shakespeare’s most popular works, read by everyone from high school students to Shakespeare scholars. Throughout the years, many film adaptations of the play have been released, luring many into the fascinating tragedy of two teenage lovers who commit suicide. Shakespeare’s play shows the evolution of these two characters, Romeo and Juliet, and their untimely death in each other’s arms. The character of Juliet is particularly interesting within the play; she is not in the play as much as Romeo, yet she is developed as a character to a greater extent. Shakespeare’s Juliet is first portrayed in the play as the ideal Renaissance woman: obedient, chaste, and quiet. Also, she is compared to celestial and heavenly images at the beginning, showing her purity and innocence. However, as the tragedy continues, she begins to gain power, voicing her opinion more and more, and ultimately taking complete power over her life by ending it. Meanwhile, as she progresses into a stronger woman, the imagery associated with her changes to more physical, earthly comparisons. While some versions of the play replicate Shakespeare’s text word for word and show this progression of Juliet’s character, others slightly alter the work in order to provide an alternative vision of the story. In Baz Luhrmann’s film William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet, the character of Juliet changes from a pure, heavenly figure into a more physical, earthly creature; this pattern mirrors Shakespeare’s transformation of Juliet; however, it lacks the steady increase of Juliet’s power that Shakespeare presents in the original text.

The first scene that gives a depiction of Juliet’s character is in the first act. In scene three, her mother comes to tell her about Paris and his intentions to marry her. She tells Juliet to “Read o’er the volume of young Paris’ face” and look at his fine qualities (Romeo and Juliet 1.3.81). Juliet, a young girl only thirteen years old, listens to her mother and promises to meet him and see if she likes him. She says, “I’ll look to like, if looking liking move” and agrees to give Paris a chance (1.3.97). In this scene, Juliet is shown as the perfect Renaissance woman; she is obedient to her parents, is quiet throughout most of the scene except for several one-line answers, and is allowing her parents to guide her towards a proper marriage. Her mother leaves this scene pleased with Juliet and is content with her child’s behavior.

In the Baz Luhrmann movie, Juliet sits on her bed and attentively listens while her mother tells her of her intended fiancé. She laughs with her nurse, seems interested in her mother’s plans, and ultimately doesn’t fight
the idea of having a husband. The actress that plays Juliet in this film, Claire Danes, was seventeen at the time of production, making her appear obviously older than a thirteen year old. Her features are more defined and mature than a prepubescent girl’s, so the audience greets her with more of an expectation for maturity than they do in the play. Since she appears older and her age isn’t discussed in the movie as it is in the text, the viewers also assume that she will act older and more mature in her decisions. Also, she wears white, signifying her purity and innocence. As Michael Anderegg says in his article, “James Dean Meets the Pirate’s Daughter: Passion and Parody in William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet and Shakespeare in Love,” Juliet “appeals to a special kind of nostalgia for girlhood innocence, not so much as lost but never available in the first place” (Anderegg 61). She is an impossible dream of purity and simplicity. She reflects Shakespeare’s portrayal of Juliet as an obedient daughter at the beginning of the play; she is visualized as a mature, innocent teenager that gets along with her parents and is obedient to them (William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet).

After Romeo and Juliet meet in the text, Juliet’s power transformation begins. In the famous balcony scene, we see Juliet’s first betrayal of her family by speaking to Romeo and exchanging vows of love. Had she been as obedient as she was portrayed before, she would have never allowed him to continue seeing her. However, the power of love moves her to act against her parents; her first act of real power. She is still being a good Renaissance woman though by making Romeo profess his love before doing anything physical with him beyond kissing. She is being naughty enough by speaking to a man out of her window, but she says that their vows of love can be his only satisfaction for the night. As Mary Bly says in her article, “Juliet’s Desire in Comedies of the Early 1600s,” the balcony scene is full of erotic references, but it is not the highlight or focus of the scene; Juliet has obvious desire but it is constantly checked and controlled (Bly 66-68). She is able to show Romeo that she is passionate for him without acting physically passionate.

Later, she tells him that “If that thy bent of love be honorable, /Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow, /By one that I’ll procure to come to thee, /Where and what time though wilt perform the rite; /And all my fortunes at they foot I’ll lay/And follow thee my lord throughout the world” (Romeo and Juliet 2.2.142-8). By saying this, she is securing her marriage to him and making sure he has honorable intentions and thus is taking some control of the situation by protecting her station. As Thomas Honegger remarks, in this scene “Juliet’s linking of ‘honorable love’ and ‘marriage’ is, of course, a rather obvious hint at what Romeo should have done, namely to declare his love and to propose” (82). By recalling this issue of propriety, she brings him back to the reality of their situation and reminds him they will never be able to be together unless they marry. She shows herself to still be an ideal Renaissance woman by saying that she will give everything she owns to him and follow him wherever he goes; she is promising to be an obedient wife and do what he wills as long as he does his duty to marry her.

In the text, this is also the some of the first representations of Juliet as a heavenly creature. She appears above him on the balcony as if she is higher on the Great Chain of Being than him, a visual representation of her purity. Romeo opens the scene with the famous lines, “But soft! What light through yonder window breaks? / It is the east, and Juliet is the sun!” (Romeo and Juliet 2.2.2-3). He is directly substituting Juliet into the role of a celestial body, showing his worship for her as a divine being. Right after, he compares her eyes to stars and calls her “bright angel” (2.2.26). Romeo’s repeated references to celestial beings make the reader begin to see his complete adoration of Juliet. It also further enhances the portrayal of Juliet as an innocent, pure woman.

It is in the balcony scene that the portrayal of Juliet in Baz Luhrmann’s film first seriously deviates from Shakespeare’s text. Though maintaining the famous lines about Juliet’s heavenly appearance and making a blunt statement in having her dress as an angel as she appears on the balcony, her actions are far from innocent. In this scene, she leaves the balcony and safety of her home and lets herself be taken by the sexual desire that they both have. In fact, they even get into her pool, kissing underwater and embracing tightly. This heightened sexuality in the scene betrays the text’s portrayal of Juliet as trying to affirm Romeo’s honorable intentions. Instead, she is not being honorable herself and letting herself be seen in a wet, white dress. This scene shows Juliet as a woman with a large degree of sexual power, getting her needs satisfied and stopping Romeo before anything too serious can happen. Instead of the steady increase of power that Shakespeare’s text indicates, she is suddenly extremely sexually powerful and while she controls the entire encounter (William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet).

After Romeo and Juliet finally marry, another scene occurs where Juliet’s power evolves further. Right after Romeo has left her bedroom, her mother and father come into the room to tell her that she must marry Paris. The choice that was presented to her at the beginning of the play has been taken away and now she is forced into an arranged marriage. The encounter turns hostile as she tries to defend her current marriage without betraying the truth that she is Romeo’s wife, her father growing more and more aggressive. Capulet is used to his daughter being the obedient, innocent girl that the reader meets at the beginning of the play. He has not been present for the growth of her power, so when she defies him, he reasserts his patriarchal position in a forceful way.

In the text, Juliet’s power reaches a new level as she tells her parents flat out that she will not marry Paris. “He shall not make me there a joyful bride!” she tells her mother before her father enters (Romeo and Juliet 3.5.118). Once her father comes in, Juliet also uses her past obedience as a foray into Capulet’s heart, trying to show him that she is still the daughter he
loves though she will not marry. She says to him “Good father, I beseech
you on my knees, / Hear me with patience but to speak a word” (3.5.159-60). This act of
getting on her knees in front of her father shows her remaining obedience to him while still defying him, however it doesn’t work. Her
calls her disobedient and threatens to disown her if she doesn’t marry
Paris. Earlier in the play she wouldn’t have pushed her father to this point, allowing him to have his way. However, because she is already married and has now gained some power throughout the play, she goes against his

The portrayal in the movie shows a different sketch of Juliet’s
power. Though the scene follows the Shakespeare’s text closely, the
explosion between Juliet and her parents is even more extreme in this scene. Her father grabs her, shakes her, and throws her to the ground in the hallway as he threatens her. She is hysterically sobbing and seems out of control. While this scene is much more emotionally charged than the play implies and the effect of it is quite powerful, Juliet is doesn’t seem to gain any power in the situation as she does in the written play. Instead of being tactful and careful with her father and playing to his patriarchal role as she does in the play, she is shown as frantic and weak. Thus far, Juliet has begun as an obedient daughter and develops some sexual power, only to lose her power with her parents when sobbing on the floor in an attempt at defiance. This roller coaster of power does not follow Shakespeare’s gradual crescendo (William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet).

After this confrontation with her parents, Juliet goes to see the Friar in an attempt to figure out her next step. She is clearly distraught and upset in her interactions with the Friar and her desperation is immediately shown when she mentions suicide. She threatens to kill herself openly and says she would rather die than marry Paris. As a reader, the immediate reaction is that of pity towards the desperate teenager, but also a feeling of unease as her threats become more grave and foreshadowing.

In the text, Juliet is portrayed as more of a sad, desperate character. She says, “Come weep with me – past hope, past cure, past help!” to the Friar, indicating that she is in a state of utter despair. She uses herself as a target in order for the Friar to help her; she probably knows that he will intervene and stop her if she is desperate enough to kill herself. When he finally does come through and offer the draught that will cause her body to imitate death, her strength that has been building throughout the play finally shines through. Her sadness and hopelessness has overshadowed her power, but in the end of the scene when she sees she has a way out she is not scared. “Give me, give me! O, tell me not of fear!” she says when he hands her the liquid, her lack of hesitation implying her control over her actions (4.1.121). Though it may be desperation guiding these acts, she is making her own decisions and acting for herself, showing her growing independence and power.

This is also the beginning of Juliet’s transformation into an Earthly creature as opposed to a celestial one. The angelic references are abandoned and now she is compared to items of the human world. For example, the Friar describes the effects of the liquor to Juliet before she takes it. He says, “The roses in thy lips and cheeks shall fade/ To wanny ashes, thy eyes’ windows fall/ Like death when he shuts up the day of life” of the physical effects (4.1.99-101). Now, Juliet is compared to flowers and eventually ashes, both items associated with life and death as well as the Earth.

In the film version, Juliet is once again portrayed in an extreme state. She is clearly a desperate woman, as in the text, however instead of portrayed as a sad, pitiful character she is a crazed, frazzled mess. She is fearful and the audience doesn’t trust her instability. Instead of targeting herself for death, she pulls a gun on the Friar, using this threat to pressure him into helping her. While one could argue that this is really a form of power, it is more likely that she is losing control over her actions and mind, driven by anger and confusion. Juliet’s extreme reaction makes sense in the film; she has just had an awful encounter with her once loving parents and now she doesn’t know who to turn to. Had this extreme, homicidal Juliet been in the text, it wouldn’t match the previous depictions of Juliet in the play. The film’s Juliet is once again declining in power. Though some critics, like Carol Chillington Rutter, believe that Juliet is the only sane character in the movie, as this scene shows, she is not as sane and together as it seems (Rutter 258).

The movie does however follow the evolution of Juliet as a creature of the Earth. She comes into the scene in a blue jumper, a change from her usual white dresses. This shows the beginning of her corruption and her loss of faith. Now that she has lost the support of her family, the one thing that was holding her back from Romeo in the first place, she feels lost and no longer innocent. Also, it implies that she is no longer a virgin; her purity is gone and she is now a woman. This is a visual representation of Juliet’s changing identity within the play; she is no longer the angel on the balcony but a tainted woman.

In the climax of the text, Romeo and Juliet commit suicide in each others arms, both thinking the other has already died. Juliet wakes from her fake death only to see Romeo poisoned beside her and decides to kill herself with Romeo’s dagger. Once she discovers that he is dead, she wastes no time in the act; her final act of power. Earlier, when she is about to take the potion that makes her seem dead, she gives a long speech about her fear of taking the potion, saying she worries it will end up killing her. Thus, the potion will actually prevent her from ever seeing Romeo again (Romeo and Juliet 4.3.24-25). However, when faced with an actual life or death decision after Romeo is dead, she chooses death without hesitation.

The entire text, Juliet has been in a struggle with outside forces to take control of her life. From the beginning, other people have been trying to make decisions about what she should do and who she should marry. At the
start she does what she is told, doing what a good Renaissance woman is expected. However, as she starts to make her own decisions and deviate from her expected path, her family speaks out against her. She must make a choice about whether or not she should return to what she is expected to do or continue on her path of growing independence. In this final scene, she makes her decision and takes control of her life in the ultimate act of freedom: suicide. She takes back the life that she has fought so hard to control.

In this scene, Romeo, the one who was comparing Juliet to angels and stars in the start of the play, now uses more Earthly words to describe her. He is about to make her seem beautiful and sweet, but instead of using a celestial term, he compares her to a product made in the Earth. By using “honey” in comparison with Juliet, it roots her to the Earth, making her a worldly body. Also, he says “Here, here will I remain/ With worms that are they chambermaids” (5.3.108-109). This can be taken literally since she is now going to begin decomposing, however it also makes it seem like she is one with the Earth. Her attendants are not cherubs or angels; they are the creatures that crawl in the soil.

Baz Luhrmann’s depiction of the suicide is extremely different. First, Paris is not slain in the same room, making their meeting and death more intimate. However, the major difference is that Romeo and Juliet actually see each other alive before their suicide. In the text, Romeo is already dead before Juliet is revived, but in the film she opens her eyes and Romeo sees her awake right before the poison takes effect. This intensifies the moment and makes Juliet understand that he is dead without the Friar’s help. As Douglas Brode says in his book Shakespeare in the Movies, “Such impact is impossible onstage, where sudden editing to extreme close-ups does not exist” (58). Luhrmann uses the medium of film to dramatize this scene, but it creates a whole different dynamic than Shakespeare intended.

This ending makes Juliet’s reaction more appropriate, but it doesn’t follow the pattern of power in the text. The movie’s suicide ending shows Juliet acting out of desperation and fear. She is crying and frantic, searching for a way out of her crazy life. She finds his gun, slowly picks it up and holds it in her hand, showing her fear and hesitation in killing herself. She does the act, but without the famous last words of the text: “Yea noise? Then I’ll be brief. O happy dagger! This is thy sheat/there rust, and let me die” (Romeo and Juliet 5.3.169-170). Because she uses a gun, the weapon of choice throughout the film, she is unable to say these lines. However, it takes away the feeling of resolve and need for finality that the text gives the reader. The reader sees that she wants to kill herself and is doing it as an act of power, but the movie makes it look like she may not actually want to and only does out of weakness.

Baz Luhrmann’s movie is an interesting addition to the many different film adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays. By using popular actors like Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes, Luhrmann appeals to a teenage viewers, making Shakespeare accessible to a wider viewing audience. Its use of violence and present day setting also makes the interpretation unique. However, because it focuses more on Romeo and his evolution as a character, Juliet’s development is abandoned. She is more of a secondary character, reacting more than acting on her own behalf. She is responding to Romeo’s actions the whole movie instead of making independent decisions. Thus, her reactions are often extreme and drastic because she lacks control over the action of the plot.

Also, Luhrmann’s Juliet travels along a roller coaster of power instead of slowly accumulating power as she does in the text. At the start, she is innocent and pure but gains some power when she has a sexual encounter with Romeo before marriage. Then she slowly loses it as she begins to unravel during the rest of the movie. Her scenes consist of one breakdown after another, always acting out of desperation and fear. The text’s Juliet also feels desperate and fearful, but channels it into a way of gaining power. She slowly learns to make decisions for herself and to choose her own destiny rather than just doing what is convenient and expected. She is emotional but not frantic, anxious but not overly hopeless.

The Luhrmann movie does stay true to Shakespeare’s symbolic and metaphorical references with Juliet. At the start of the play, Romeo compares her to heavenly bodies and celestial beings. Over the course of the work she is made into an Earthly creature with comparisons to plants and ashes replacing stars and angels. The movie does this by including all of the speeches Romeo makes containing these references as well as by using the visual representations to show her change. For example, Juliet is in white at the beginning and is dressed as an angel at her parent’s masquerade. As she loses her innocence and purity she loses her white apparel, appearing in a blue jumper and a colored night gown. She only returns to her white when she is laid in her tomb, symbolizing the fact that she is about to be made into an angel.

Overall, Luhrmann’s movie is an interesting representation of Shakespeare’s work. However, Juliet’s power curve leaves the viewer disappointed in her actions. It is hard to watch the heroine acting in a manner that leaves the audience uneasy and uncomfortable. He stays true to Juliet’s symbolic representation from heavenly to Earthly, but to the common teenage viewer, this is easily missed. Shakespeare’s Juliet is much stronger and pleasing to the reader; Luhrmann’s Juliet is weak and disappointing.
Works Cited


