"Closed in a Dead Man’s Tomb":
Juliet, Space, and the Body in Franco Zeffirelli’s and Baz Luhrmann’s Films of Romeo and Juliet.

Given each director’s decision to adapt and popularize Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet for a teenage audience, it is hardly surprising that many critics have highlighted the similarities between the film adaptations of Franco Zeffirelli (1968) and Baz Luhrmann (1996). Critical discussions of Luhrmann’s William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet often speculate on how much influence Zeffirelli’s earlier film had on Luhrmann’s approach: James N. Loehlin comments that Luhrmann’s frequent borrowings from Zeffirelli tend to be “simple replications rather than pointed reworkings” (127); Samuel Crowl describes how it was directors such as Zeffirelli who “nudged the Shakespeare film from the art house to the Cineplex,” paving the way for the likes of Luhrmann to find success with an international teenage market (134). Both directors make large cuts to the play-text in order to make its contents more “accessible” for audiences and, as a result, their treatment of Shakespeare has been likened to Shakespeare’s treatment of his own sources (Walker 135). Like Zeffirelli before him, Luhrmann cast young, attractive actors in the roles of Romeo and Juliet and, as Elsie Walker comments, this reflects how each director saw “the ability of a wide audience to identify with their protagonists as crucial” (134). However, despite the many noted similarities, these Shakespeare films offer radically different representations of Juliet for their respective audiences.

What is perhaps most unexpected, given the cultural climate of Luhrmann’s film and “the pressure put on cinema by an increasingly educated, increasingly sexually confident, and increasingly salaried female audience” of the nineties (Daileader 187), is that, in terms of desire and agency, Claire Danes’s Juliet resides at the opposite end of the spectrum to Olivia Hussey’s. While critics such as Peter S. Donaldson observe how Zeffirelli’s film underscores “Shakespeare’s treatment of Juliet as an active, desiring subject” (165), notably less has been said about the agency of Danes’s Juliet under Luhrmann’s direction. Danes’s lack of agency in the film becomes most apparent through a consideration of the body’s representation, an analytical framework that demonstrates, as Aebischer observes, how “Shakespearean performance studies have benefited from a lively dialogue with film theory and gender studies” (112). This essay looks at the bodily and spatial representations of Juliet on film in order to explore the differences between each director’s handling of her role as “desiring subject.” By focusing on a comparative reading of the tomb scene, my argument will consider how the directorial
choices of Zeffirelli and Luhrmann either promote or repress the sexual agency of Shakespeare’s heroine.

The spatial strategies of Franco Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet* emphasize Juliet’s sexual awareness and her open expressions of desire. Despite the fact that Shakespeare’s heroine “hath not seen the change of fourteen years” (1.2.9), critics observe how Juliet’s use of language would have allowed an Elizabethan audience to “grasp her sexual knowledge and her consciousness of carnal desire” (Bly 99). Zeffirelli’s film visualizes this aspect of her characterization by associating images of ripeness, growth, and sexual awakening with Olivia Hussey’s Juliet. While the “Gallop apace” speech (3.2.1-31) is omitted from Zeffirelli’s script, its verbalization of Juliet’s sexual longing is mediated through the film’s gendered spaces that mark the awakening of carnal desire. The colorful visual excess of Zeffirelli’s ball scene creates a space for Juliet’s sexual awakening and her self-progression from adolescence to womanhood: lavish displays of fruit and wine; warmly lit archways; rich fabrics, and Juliet’s red dress as central focus, all connote a feminine softness that alludes to the “ripeness” of Juliet’s impending sexuality.

Critics such as Celia Daileader note how Shakespeare’s play “has always been, to some degree, about *Juliet*” (188), and Zeffirelli’s interpretation strengthens such viewpoints by privileging Juliet’s first experience of desire, rather than Romeo’s. In the dance sequence, the alternating camera shots of the lovers are carefully balanced to connote reciprocal feelings and a sense of harmony in their first meeting. However, elsewhere in this scene, Zeffirelli’s camera favors Juliet’s responses. As Romeo begins the line, “My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand” (1.5.94), the camera cuts to a close-up shot of Juliet’s face; her eyes close slowly, and the “ineffable, almost drugged quality of her gaze” connotes awakened desire and “the surprise of adolescent sexual discovery” (Daileader 188). The intense close-up marks the attachment of the viewer’s gaze and Juliet’s internal thoughts: it is not Romeo who is looking at Juliet and registering her desiring look at this point, but the spectator, as Romeo is shown to be standing behind her in the previous shot.

Ultimately, we are not encouraged to share in Romeo’s experience of this first meeting as intimately as we are with Juliet’s, and the shots that follow indicate a gaze that initiates from Juliet’s perspective—a gaze that Romeo reciprocates—as she turns to face him behind the curtain. The alignments of the gaze seem to suggest a balance between gender roles in terms of object and bearer of the look; as Donaldson observes, Zeffirelli’s camera addresses us as “watchers of male as well as female beauty” (165). However, I would also suggest that, in this particular sequence, the perspective of Zeffirelli’s camera transgresses the conventions of the traditional cinematic male gaze, visually coding Juliet as bearer of the look and providing a unique space for a “feminine” gaze. While the film’s opportunities for a female gaze may not be frequent enough to indicate a reversal of cinema’s conventional patriarchal structures of seeing (as Donaldson suggests), a denial of
these unique spaces seems equally inadequate in light of Zeffirelli’s treatment of Juliet as the film’s active subject, and the audience’s intended identification with her desiring look.³

The film’s spatial and bodily signifiers of Juliet’s agency extend beyond the ball scene. Images of Juliet’s body (and body parts) are used to connote her strength, growth, and sexual maturity. Close-ups of hands are first used to symbolize the meeting of the lovers, as in Shakespeare’s play-text (1.5.92-106), but elsewhere in the film, the image of the hand most frequently belongs to Hussey’s Juliet: she moves her hand to her lips in remembrance of Romeo’s kiss; she once again initiates the joining of hands in the balcony scene to signal her return of “love’s faithful vow” (2.2.127); and the film’s final and most significant hand gesture, filmed in a tight close-up, is reserved for her waking in the tomb.

Hussey’s use of hand gestures suggests Juliet’s ability to internalize emotion, and thus control it. In contrast to this suggestion of control, Romeo’s emotions are frequently signaled to the viewer, not through the immediate use of the body, but with external objects that symbolize feeling. First shown carrying a flower to indicate his romantic and melancholy mood, and later taking up the blood-stained handkerchief to express his anger over Mercutio’s death and his own “reputation stained” (3.1.102), Leonard Whiting’s Romeo does not express himself in the same internal fashion as Hussey’s Juliet.

Whether it is a mask to hide behind, or a phallic sword with which to assert his masculinity and thus remove his “effeminate” weakness, Romeo’s display of emotion remains externally displayed through objects rather than the body. As a result of this, the “internal” signifiers of Juliet’s self-development are pitched against the “external” signifiers of Romeo’s perpetual state of adolescence. Although Irving Ribner notes that, “to demonstrate the particular progress of the human life journey, Shakespeare concentrates upon Romeo” (276), Zeffirelli’s representations of the body overturn such arguments to promote Juliet as the major character who grows and develops through her experiences.

In the tomb scene, Zeffirelli constructs a space that holds Juliet’s unconscious body as its central focus, despite Romeo’s mobility and her rigidity. The centrality of her body is signaled to the viewer by the camera remaining on her face, while Romeo repeatedly speaks his lines out of shot. When he delivers his final speech, the camera alternates between shots of Romeo and close-up shots of Juliet, as if a conversation were taking place between them. A further image implies a subjective camera shot from Romeo’s perspective: he stands at her feet and looks up at the entire length of her body from what appears to be a submissive viewpoint, due
to the camera’s low position. Spatially, the tomb’s domain is inherently female: an early shot of Romeo and Balthasar arriving outside the church is dominated by the dark arches of the entrance gates and the tomb’s arched doorway; a statue of a mother holding her child guards its entrance and is frequently in shot as Romeo breaks open the doors. After Romeo “descends” into the vault, with its pillars and dark passages, he stands over Juliet’s body in long-shot, and the ominous archway that looms behind her body fills the space of the frame and draws the viewer’s eye toward another female statue at the center of its dark tunnel. The tomb’s interior is not unlike Romeo’s metaphor of the “womb of death” (5.3.45-48); however, Zeffirelli’s “womblike vault surrounded with pillars” (Cartmell 44) is a gendered space that simultaneously removes the abhorrence of female sexuality that can be found in the language of Shakespeare’s play-text.

There are numerous verbal and visual elements within the subtext of Shakespeare’s tomb scene that imply a male anxiety toward female sexuality. In Romeo’s metaphor, the womb is the all-devouring tomb, a fearful site that must necessarily be “gorged” with “more food” and threatens to take back that to which it once gave life (5.3.46-48). The vagina itself is the monstrous space of the tomb’s opening—a “detestable maw” with “rotten jaws,” gaping, due to the absence of the penis (5.3.45-47). Romeo’s speech lingers on castration anxiety, and his “entrance” of the tomb is verbally constructed as a violent and bloody metaphorical rape. Similarly, Romeo and Paris must assert their phallic weapons before Romeo enters the tomb, and the blood that will “stain the stony entrance of this sepulchre” (5.3.140-41) has overtly sexual implications. Not only is the additional presence of the phallus a symbolic means for controlling the feminine but, by drawing attention to aspects such as the toothed entrance and the bloodstained passage, female erotic power is simultaneously abhorred and controlled through the play’s imagery.

Zeffirelli de-centralizes the patriarchal strategies at work in Shakespeare’s tomb scene. Romeo’s metaphor of the “womb of death” is omitted from the script, and the duel sequence with Paris is also removed as a means of deliberately excluding the presence of the phallus. This not only presents Zeffirelli’s Romeo as more innocent than Shakespeare’s, but also implies his impotence in the space of the tomb, due to the absence of his phallic weapon. In symbolic terms, the erotic nature of Juliet’s act of suicide with the dagger is elevated due to her sole manipulation of the phallic image and the “pleasurable” ecstasy of her death. Zeffirelli’s spatial representation of the “womb-like” tomb can also be understood as marginalizing the patriarchal discourse of Romeo’s language. In a discussion that refers to the subconscious treatment of female reproductive imagery on screen, Barbara Creed suggests that “unlike the female genitalia, the womb cannot be constructed as a ‘lack’ in relation to the penis [...] rather, the womb signifies ‘fullness’ or ‘emptiness,’ but always it is its own point of reference” (136). While the abhorred image of Romeo’s speech
is the “detestable maw” (the toothed vagina that castrates and devours), Zeffirelli’s visual strategies focus on the womb itself for the spatial construction of the tomb: the “lack” of the vagina is not a point of fearful or monstrous representation. Thus Zeffirelli’s tomb scene allows for “a notion of the feminine which does not depend for its definition on a concept of the masculine” (Creed 136). By positing a more archaic dimension to this representation of the womb—“the mother who gives birth all by herself” (134)—Zeffirelli’s tomb scene provides a space that enhances Juliet’s sexual agency and the autonomy of her suicide with the dagger.

After considering such a reading of Zeffirelli’s film, it seems ironic that the more recent screen adaptation of Shakespeare’s play, Baz Luhrmann’s William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet, should offer audiences a Juliet who is passive, rather than active, by comparison. Although both films satisfy many of the conventional requirements for the category of “teen-Shakespeare,” Luhrmann’s Romeo + Juliet features a Juliet who is oddly lacking in the desire and agency of Shakespeare’s heroine. As Mary Bly notes, Shakespeare’s Juliet is “unsuited to the role of Petrarchan mistress” (55), and yet, ironically, Luhrmann’s visual treatment of Juliet’s body repeatedly alludes to the Petrarchan aesthetic. Unlike Hussey, Danes’s Juliet is a picture of stillness, a body frequently lost in the frantic pace and “movement” of Luhrmann’s film. Costumed as a Botticelli angel with wings at the Capulet ball, her body becomes a visual replica of the many porcelain figures of angels and cherubs that adorn her dressing room table; a shot of her watching fireworks and standing motionless on her balcony likens her to the immobility of a statue. In the postmodern frenzy of Luhrmann’s film world, where images are devoid of depth or truth and “Christian symbols stripped of meaning and translated into designer ornaments” (Tatspaugh 142), Juliet’s religious statues are empty signifiers: still and porcelain-like, they appear as empty extensions of herself.

The visual splendor of Luhrmann’s “millennial Shakespeare” proved to be so distracting for reviewers that it became the focal point of both positive and negative criticism, leaving critics with considerably less to say about the film’s gender politics. Strong responses to its “relentless, in-your-face MTV visual style and soundtrack” (Crowl 119) often meant that other aspects of Luhrmann’s approach were somewhat marginalized or left relatively unexplored. Several critics who reviewed Luhrmann’s Romeo + Juliet do acknowledge that the film centers on DiCaprio’s Romeo rather than Danes’s Juliet. For instance, José Arroyo comments that it is Romeo who “bears the brunt of feeling” in a “superb performance” (9).

For Danes’s Juliet, only ironic comments that describe her as “the film’s still centre” (Rutter 258), or recount how she “brings a quiet resolution to her part” (Arroyo 9), touch on the silencing and immobilization of her body. Michael Anderegg wittily describes her as “an ideal Victorian Juliet” (62), who is “neither a contemporary teenager nor a Shakespearean heroine” (62). He also suggests...
that Luhrmann's focus on Romeo is, "in a sense, a reversal of the dynamics of Shakespeare's play, where Juliet is clearly the one who articulates much of the play's emotional texture" (71). Anderegg makes a crucial point here, although sadly it is an observation that only features in the endnotes of his argument. However, given the virtual "erasure" of Danes's body in Luhrmann's film, it is hardly surprising that critical discussions of Romeo + Juliet found so very little to say about her character.

Luhrmann's camera transforms Danes's Juliet into a still, objectified body, and at moments where Shakespeare's play demands passion and energy, she is virtually erased from the spectator's gaze. In her introductory scene, the garish colors, whirling operatic music, and numerous pans and zooms through the Capulet mansion overwhelm the brief image of a young girl's face underwater. Lost in the apparent chaos of the Capulet household, Juliet is overshadowed by the impact of her mother's dramatic entrance. Gloria Capulet breezes into her daughter's bedroom on speeded-up camera; she talks emphatically about Paris and squeezes into her Cleopatra corset with all servants attending to her. With her daughter's gaze remaining fixed upon her (as well as our own), Lady Capulet instructs Juliet to "speak briefly"—and indeed she does, for the remainder of the film. Danes's Juliet is not only still: she is also frequently silent. Her character suffers most from Luhrmann's textual omissions, and her verbal expressions of passion and agency are often weakened by the apparent denial of her screen presence. At moments where Shakespeare's Juliet is able to take control of the language, Danes is ignored by Luhrmann's camera as it repeatedly searches for Romeo. As she speaks her first lines of the shared sonnet in the ball scene, the camera does not rest on her face but instead focuses on Romeo's in an extreme close-up, thus privileging his reaction over her expression of desire. As a result of her body's absence from the spectator's gaze, Juliet's lines in the shared sonnet lose all emphasis and control.

Although there are obvious similarities between Zeffirelli's film and Luhrmann's in the set-up and organization of the ball scene, structures of seeing and spatial connotations are dramatically overturned in the latter. While Zeffirelli constructs a gendered space to visually signify Juliet's sexual awakening, Luhrmann's film concentrates on male actions (and male reactions) as we enter the party scene through the skewed perspective of "Romeo's 'acid'-addled gaze" (Hamilton 120). As he enters past the guards, several extreme close-ups of Romeo's eyes are accompanied by the displacement of the line "thy drugs are quick" (5.3.120). The camera then reveals the "excesses" of the party from Romeo's perspective: Mercutio, in the bright lights of his drag performance, comes uncomfortably close to the camera with red-painted lips; Tybalt, dressed in devil horns, kisses Lady Capulet; and Lord Capulet, with sweating painted cheeks and his toga raised to his knees, sings in girlish squeals.
As if recoiling from them, Romeo appears to fall backwards, and the scene cuts to an underwater shot of him soaking his head in a water basin to recover from his hallucinations. Luhrmann’s film not only privileges Romeo’s perspective here (as opposed to Zeffirelli’s treatment of a desiring female gaze), but the drug-induced visions also imply a rejection of feminized or “weakened” masculinity. When Romeo discards his mask into the water, indicating the end of his drugged, or “distorted,” gaze, he also abandons the “abnormal” visions of his bad trip that subsequently pose a threat to his masculinity. The camera view normalizes, and Romeo beholds Juliet through the water of an aquarium, now with fresh eyes, recalling his line, “Call me but love, and I’ll be new baptis’d” (2.2.50). In a subconscious fashion, heterosexual love is “normalised” through the film’s coded structures of seeing.

In contrast to the spectator’s intended identification with Juliet’s desiring look in Zeffirelli’s film, what we often find in Luhrmann’s manipulations of the gaze is the viewer watching Romeo, watching Juliet. With the camera closely following Romeo’s movements, Luhrmann’s tomb scene emphasizes the need to look away from Juliet’s “assumed corpse,” frequently positioning her body out of camera shot and instead drawing the viewer’s gaze toward Romeo’s reaction to the discovery of her body. A further irony is that because Romeo also fails to look on Juliet’s body, he fails to see her waking up. He is so consumed by his own grief that he does not see her body begin to move. Although the spectator is made aware of this, Luhrmann’s camera is likewise so preoccupied with Romeo’s reactions and the impact of his suicide that Juliet’s actions after her waking seem of little consequence: her absence from the camera’s gaze erases the subjectivity of her body.

When Romeo dies, everything ends in Luhrmann’s film. All musical accompaniment ceases, and an extreme close-up of his face appears for several moments, as if lamenting the end of his story. In contrast to this visual lament, Luhrmann’s camera is dramatically distanced when Juliet kills herself with Romeo’s gun. We hear the gunshot echo eerily around the church, but all that remains visible of Juliet is her small white figure collapsing onto the bier. By replacing the penetrative “happy dagger” (5.3.168) with a fatal gunshot, the sexual agency of Juliet’s suicide is also, in a sense, erased, as the phallic nature of the object does not have any material bearing in the final act of suicide. In contrast to Zeffirelli’s exclusion of Romeo’s use of his sword in the tomb, Luhrmann returns the phallic power of Juliet’s suicide weapon to Romeo: the scene begins with a dramatic car and helicopter chase to mark Romeo’s “entrance” of the tomb, in which Romeo’s gun is the central threatening object. Its phallic presence precedes Romeo’s as he gazes
voyeuristically through a small opening in the doors of the vault and opens them with the gun in an extreme close-up.

In Luhrmann's film, the gun not only symbolizes patriarchal violence—it glamorizes it. It represents the acts of male aggression that occur with increasing violence throughout the film's narrative (the pistol duel between the Capulets and Montagues; Mercutio's "gunplay" at Verona Beach; Tybalt's murder) and eventually culminate with the silencing of Juliet's body. When Romeo takes his last breath, he also takes the last line of the scene: "thus with a kiss, I die" (5.3.120), leaving Juliet to act out her final moments in an oppressive silence. Like many stage productions of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Luhrmann increases the tragedy of this scene by having Juliet wake just before Romeo's death. But rather than injecting any dialogue between the lovers (as Garrick's version famously did), Luhrmann's alteration robs Juliet of her final speech and simultaneously removes her capacity for agency in death. Her lines are cut after Romeo dies, at which point she sobs helplessly like a child and, seeing Romeo's gun, she picks it up and blows her brains out. It is an act that is presented to the spectator as defeat rather than triumph, helplessness rather than control.

After exploring the spatial and bodily representations of Juliet in both Zeffirelli and Luhrmann, we might be left asking: what forms of "identification" does Luhrmann's Romeo + Juliet allow for a female spectator? What spaces are provided to promote Juliet's story, Juliet's voice, and to connote her body's agency? How are we to interpret her silencing within this final scene and the repression of her sexual desire? These are questions that have, so far, not troubled critical responses to the latest popular adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy. Neither did they seem to trouble the film's teen audiences: the inclusion of DiCaprio's Romeo no doubt provided ample "eye candy" for the young teenage girls who flocked to cinemas and, ironically, viewers were happy to award Claire Danes with the title of "Best Female Performance" at the MTV Movie Awards. Perhaps this reflects more on the popularity of Danes than on Luhrmann's handling of Juliet's role? For while critics have often questioned Danes's acting abilities, the purpose of my own argument is not to assert that Danes gives a bad performance in Luhrmann's film. Rather, it is Luhrmann who gives a bad performance on film for Danes, and an equally disappointing close for Juliet in twentieth century film. For Luhrmann, Shakespeare's "story of woe" is very much one of Romeo, and his Juliet (5.3.308-9).

Lindsey Scott
The University of Chester
Notes

1 Comparisons of Zeffirelli’s and Luhrmann’s Juliet tend to be limited to brief comments on the acting abilities of Claire Danes and Olivia Hussey in the role. For example, Samuel Crowl remarks that Hussey’s Juliet “supplied all the power and breathless energy” in Zeffirelli’s film, while Danes’s Juliet “does not have Hussey’s dark-eyed beauty or passion” (130). Alternatively, and with notably more approval of Danes in the role, José Arroyo writes: “Danes brings a quiet resolution to her part, a maturity and pragmatism evoked by her face and figure as much as by her acting, while still looking like an adolescent” (9).

2 For further commentary on the cinematic male gaze, see Mulvey 6-18.

3 Donaldson writes: “it is not enough to say that Zeffirelli offers a feminine gaze for our identification that is analogous to the customary male look at the female as object of sexual desire.” He argues that the gaze, in these particular moments, “is and is not Juliet’s”; the viewer’s gaze is not entirely in line with Juliet’s as “what we see, though anchored in and representative of her experience of Romeo, is also partly independent of her” (169).

4 Cartmell notes that “Romeo is made less guilty through the film’s deletion of his exploitation of the apothecary (5.2) and his slaying of Paris” (44).

5 See Downing 128.

6 For an example, see Welsh 152.

Works Cited


146/“Closed in a Dead Man’s Tomb”: Romeo and Juliet


Filmography


