

“What’s in a name?”
Linguistic Games with Shakespeare’s Names
or
How to Communicate Shakespeare on Film

“What’s in a name?”, asks rhetorically the title heroine in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (2.1.85).¹ The answer is: “A lot”. Although Juliet eventually talks about the arbitrariness of naming at large (“That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet” [85-86]), what instigates her relevant monologue (as well as Romeo’s response to her views) is the title hero’s family name (as well as hers), which automatically makes them enemies. In the play (as in real life) names like “Montague” or “Capulet” acquire social value within a certain context (Watts 58). And there is more. A character’s name may bear possible mythical connotations (Paris) or denote a personal attitude (Benvolio); it may articulate class (Prince), profession (Nurse) or theatrical convention (Chorus), reflecting both the play’s and the playwright’s era. On the other hand, there are more words that allude to those eras, such as the names of weapons used at the time. But what impact do these names or contexts have on a modern audience? Are they adaptable to our time? In this paper I intend to explore the way characters’ names as well as other problematic words are adapted to a modern context in two film versions of Shakespeare’s tragedy, namely Baz Luhrmann’s celebrated *Romeo and Juliet* and Lloyd Kaufman’s iconoclastic *Tromeo and Juliet* (both released in 1996). My analysis will touch on phonetics, semantics (lexical relations) and word-formation processes, and will also discuss issues such as pronunciation and delivery, mass media discourse, social dialects and puns.

When Baz Luhrmann and Lloyd Kaufman made their versions of *Romeo and Juliet*, they had, apparently, the same thing in mind (more or less): Luhrmann’s intention was “to make this movie rambunctious, sexy, violent, and entertaining the way Shakespeare might have it if he had been a filmmaker” (qtd in Rothwell 241); and Kaufman’s aim was to provide “[a]ll the body-piercing, kinky sex, and car crashes that Shakespeare wanted but never had”.² It has been aptly argued that Shakespeare was as “vulgar” in his time as is Luhrmann in ours, and both of them have been regarded as representatives of popular culture and entertainers of the masses.³ Stephen Blackheart makes the same remark on Kaufman’s film, claiming that the movie “attempts to impact the viewer in the same way theatre-goers were effected in Shakespeare’s time”.⁴

The outcome is rich in both cases: Luhrmann skips “from one genre to another—Spaghetti western to *Miami Vice*, Busby Berkeley to pop video [...] employing the kind of disorienting camera work more usually associated with police dramas like *NYPD Blue*” (O’ Connor 30) in a movie “filtered through John Woo’s Hong Kong action movies, and the hip-hop and gangsta rap of MTV” (Rothwell 241).⁵ As for *Tromeo and Juliet*, it may recall Peter Jackson’s films or *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*,⁶ but it mainly reminds of other Troma films, featuring “over the top gore, lots of nudity, lots of toxic goo, and just plain sickness”.⁷ If Troma “specializes in not just transgressive but outrageously transgressive films” (Rothwell 228), *Tromeo and Juliet* is yet another “Tromatic” film.

But what of the language that goes with the package? Luhrmann decided to keep the Shakespearean text intact in his film (which perhaps justifies its full title, *William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet*), to “inspect the place of Shakespeare [...] in contemporary culture”, as W. B. Worthen claims (qtd in Rothwell 244), and did so in spite of his actors’ “decidedly American accents”, as Marjorie Baumgarten remarks.⁸ Most commentators agree that few of the actors can actually handle the Shakespearean text.⁹ Sandi Chaitram argues that Shakespeare’s text is “spoken as a language”; Rob Blackwelder talks about a “phonetic delivery of dialogue”; and Roger Ebert remarks that much of the dialogue “is shouted unintelligibly, while the rest is recited dutifully, as in a high school production”.¹⁰ But pronunciation and delivery is not the main problem with Shakespeare’s language in Luhrmann’s film. Kenneth S. Rothwell admits that “it is odd to hear Romeo say ‘O me! what fray was here?’ (1.1.173) after a

¹ The quotes from Shakespeare’s text follow the compact edition of the Oxford Complete Works.

² See the synopsis of *Tromeo and Juliet* on <http://www.troma.com/movies/tromeoandjuliet/>.

³ See jdlwallen and Stephanie King on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0117509/usercomments>.

⁴ See Blackheart’s summary of the film on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/plotsummary>.

⁵ On Woo also see Dequina and Frazer; on MTV also see Baumgarten; Blackwelder; Dequina; Ebert; Westhoff. For more on both influences see the users’ comments on the *IMDb*.

⁶ On Jackson’s films see Carvalho and Lindsey; on *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* see Frank Habets and paw-8, all on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>.

⁷ On a rough definition of a Troma film see TMAN247 on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>.

⁸ On the actors’ accents also see Kempley.

⁹ Rob Blackwelder argues that the only actors who can “wrap their mouths around Shakespeare’s weighty dialogue” are Pete Postlethwaite (praised for the same reason by Jeffrey Westhoff) as Father Lawrence and Miriam Margolyes (also praised by Bryant Frazer) as Juliet’s nurse. Roger Ebert seems to agree with Blackwelder. Michael Dequina argues that Claire Danes also “makes the Elizabethan speech sound natural”, and so does Westhoff. According to Rita Kempley, Leonardo Di Caprio is as efficient. For more on that matter see the users’ comments on the *IMDb*, which vary remarkably.

¹⁰ For more on this matter see the users’ comments on the *IMDb*.

violent explosion in a gasoline station", but argues that "once the ear adjusts, it becomes a probable improbability" (241). Although this mixture does not always work (Frazer),¹¹ Jack Garner makes an interesting observation, at least for those who think it works: "the language works at least partly because Luhrmann places the tale in an IMAGINED modern world—this is no real California or Florida beach town. Think of it more as an alternate universe—a place with cars and guns where people talk in 'thees' and 'thous'".¹²

In *Tromeo and Juliet*; on the contrary, our ear would most probably find it hard to adjust, since the language is not uniform; if in Luhrmann's film the young Montagues and Capulets "spout[...] Shakespearean verse like trash talk" (Westhoff), in the dialogues by James Gunn and Kaufman himself Shakespeare's language merges with the social dialect used by modern youngsters.¹³ Thus, for example, Juliet's famous Shakespearean line "Parting is such sweet sorrow" (2.1.229) is followed by Tromeo's response in a "mid-nineties grunge fashion":¹⁴ "Yeah, totally sucks!". Such a dialogue may be considered "irritating and stupid".¹⁵ Still, Brian McKay talks about "an odd but compelling mixture of classic Shakespearean lines mixed with Bronx slang"¹⁶ and argues that the frequent and fairly seamless alternation between the two enhances the comic effect.¹⁷ And if Kaufman is far from using the whole text, Allan Ulrich argues that his version "communicate[s] so more eloquently to the younger generation".¹⁸

Unlike the iconoclastic Kaufman, Luhrmann sticks to the original text exploiting techniques it would be impossible to use in a modern production for the stage. A characteristic problem pointed out by several critics is the vocabulary referring to weapons no longer used in the modern era described by Luhrmann. The film-director resolves that problem with cinematic ease, as in the super macro slam zoom along the barrel of Benvolio's gun revealing the engraved gun type "Sword 9mm Series S", which perfectly explains a line such as "Put up your swords" (1.1.61) within its new context.¹⁹

Although Kaufman, unlike his Australian colleague, is certainly not anxious about keeping the Shakespearean text intact, he still does so when he can take advantage of it as it is. And if he is not faithful to Shakespeare, he is consistent with his promise to provide kinky sex. In *Tromeo* polysemy works perfectly to that end, as the film-maker chooses from a word's alternative but related meanings the one that serves him best: in the famous line "See how she leans her cheek upon her hand" (2.1.65), uttered by Romeo (here Tromeo) in the so-called "balcony scene", "cheek" becomes, of course, "either side of the buttocks", rather than "either side of the face, esp. that part below the eye" (*Shorter English Dictionary* 189), since the hand of Juliet, who is tied up by her father, is indeed touching that part of her body.²⁰ When he does not adjust, like Luhrmann, visual details to the Shakespearean text, Kaufman does the opposite: he adjusts Shakespeare to what he provides visually. Hence the irreverent distortion of yet another famous Shakespearean line, which is transmuted into "What light from yonder *plexiglass* breaks?",²¹ since Juliet, instead of appearing at a window, as in the original, is in that scene imprisoned by her father in a plexiglass cage.

In *Tromeo and Juliet*, however, textual changes may also reflect crucial deviations from Shakespeare's play. Unlike Luhrmann, who retains the equal social status of the two rival families found in the original, Kaufman makes a radical change: Capulet has tricked his rival out of the pornographic movie business they once ran together. The contrast between the Capulets' high and their rivals' now low economic status is implied in the beginning of the film through the use of antonymy; the outcome is "[t]wo households, *different* as dried plums and pears"—instead of "[t]wo households, both *alike* in dignity", as described by the Chorus in the very first line of Shakespeare's Prologue.²²

Although Luhrmann does not make any changes concerning the characters' overall status in the play, he still provides them with a totally different background, which sometimes makes alterations inevitable. As John O' Connor points out, making radical changes to fit a modern audience is not merely a right; it is a duty (48). Still, Luhrmann keeps these changes to a minimum, that is, merely to off-text details.²³ The names of the characters (as well as what they represent) are a good example of the changes made to fit the new background, in both

¹¹ For more on that matter see the users' comments on the *IMDb*, which, once more, vary, ranging from excited approval to absolute rejection.

¹² Kempley also remarks that Verona Beach exists "outside known time and space", and so does Mercy Bell on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0117509/usercomments>.

¹³ On social dialects and age see Yule 241-42.

¹⁴ See Steve on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>.

¹⁵ See Paul Andrews on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>.

¹⁶ In fact, the Bard's lines are only sporadically heard, as Dwayne E. Leslie remarks. It has been argued that the film may not even be labelled an adaptation, since it follows the main idea but the original dialogue is barely present (dead dude in the house on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>).

¹⁷ This mixture has been seen as hilarious, ironic and surrealistic (doublegh, Robert and TMAN247, respectively, on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>).

¹⁸ It has been argued that Shakespeare's dialogue was "trimmed a lot [...] after test audiences didn't approve" (hockeybutt on <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>).

¹⁹ On the weapons see Ebert; O'Connor 32-34; Rothwell 242. For more on that matter see the users' comments on the *IMDb*.

²⁰ On polysemy see Yule 121.

²¹ On that line see McKay, Rothwell and Scheib.

²² On antonymy see Yule 118.

²³ As Kempley remarks, Luhrmann takes liberties with the world, not the words.

Luhmann's and Kaufman's versions. For example, in Luhmann's film the character of the Prince loses any class connotations and becomes Captain Prince of the Verona Beach Police Department, to suit an era when princes are powerless (or non-existent) and order is established by the police. Kaufman in *Tromeo* makes a similar move by using the Prince's name, "Escalus", to name his own representative of order, Detective Ernie Scalus (whose first name initialised gives with his last name the homophonous "E. Scalus").²⁴

In *Tromeo* Kaufman takes a step further by turning into something else a character that is kept intact by his Australian colleague: if a nurse seems to fit in Luhmann's traditional Mafia-like Capulet family (O'Connor 21, 32),²⁵ her presence being further justified by the self-absorbed mother Gloria Capulet, in *Tromeo* such a character seems totally out of place. Instead, Kaufman introduces Ness (another example of homophony—and a rather obvious satire of the English pronunciation of "nurse"),²⁶ Juliet's lesbian girlfriend, and still a member of the household (she is the Capulets' cook), to make once more real the kinky sex promised in the synopsis.

Consistent with the teenage culture they introduce among the young members of the "two households", both directors also use a relevant word formation process, namely clipping, for some of the youngsters' names. For example, in Luhmann's film "Abraham" becomes "Abra",²⁷ to suit an era when "Abraham" seems too old-fashioned (especially when, being the name of an old patriarch, it is given to a young man) and when names, especially among youngsters, are often clipped or turned into nicknames. Similarly, Benvolio in *Tromeo* becomes Benny, thus losing the peace-making connotations of his original name.²⁸

If "Abraham" is too old-fashioned a name for one of Luhmann's youngsters, so is, perhaps, "Paris". May be this is the reason why the latter is turned into a surname:²⁹ Romeo's rival becomes Dave Paris ("Dave" also being a clipped version of "David"), and a rather rare name is replaced by a more common one. Thus, the possible mythological connotations of the original name (although he does not know it, the character intends, like the Trojan Paris, to have for himself an already married woman) become even less evident. In *Tromeo* the name of Romeo's rival is also changed, in a way that is rather characteristic of Tromatic humour: here Paris becomes London. Instead of the name, Kaufman employs the homonymous French capital for his joke. Thus, "Paris" (the city), a hyponym of a hypernym that could be, for example, "European capitals", is replaced by "London", another co-hyponym of the same superordinate.³⁰

If Luhmann limits name changes to secondary characters, Kaufmann once more takes a step further; in fact, he goes so far as to alter the male protagonist's both first and last names. "Montague" splits into "Monty Que" (almost a homophone, whose q instead of g is actually closer to the original Italian name, "Montecchi", in Shakespeare's sources³¹), first and last name of the title hero's father. As for Romeo himself, he becomes Tromeo, providing the perfect pun on the company's name.³²

An interesting shift in both films is the way the two film-makers deal with the Chorus, who is not only a character, but also a theatrical device that seems out of place in a modern context. In *Tromeo* the distorted lines of the Shakespearean Chorus are given to Lemmy of the house of Motörhead (an obvious pun on the houses of Montague and Capulet), which seems in tune with the punk mood of the film (Scheib). But if Lemmy is still no part of the action in *Tromeo*, in his version Luhmann seems to handle the problem of the Chorus much better. In Shakespeare's play the Chorus is given to a certain extent the role of the modern mass media: he informs a wider audience about what happens in Verona. In Luhmann's version the lines of the Chorus are aptly given to an anchorwoman on a television screen. If the text is still Shakespeare's, the way it is delivered (a unified delivery with minimal or no engagement³³) clearly underscores the characteristics of television discourse. And this is not the only time this discourse is used in the film. Apart from the rivals' feud on the news, the Capulet's "old accustomed feast" is on a kind of *Entertainment Tonight* show, and the list of the guests, scrolling across the screen, is read off by one of the hosts. Television, though, is not the only mass medium that covers the life of the high society of Verona Beach. Meanwhile, Dave Paris figures on the cover of the *Timely* magazine (an obvious pun on *The Times*) as "bachelor of the year". Finally, the vans next to the police cars outside the church at the end

²⁴ On homophony see Yule 120-21.

²⁵ "Capulet" may, in fact, allude to "capo", the head of such a family, although Luhmann's Capulets are rather represented as a family of Hispanic origin—see, for example, the look of the boys (described as "Latinos" in the screenplay) or the Nurse's accent (commented on by Westhoff and Steve Rhodes).

²⁶ For the English pronunciation of the word see Jones 345; for its American pronunciation see Kenyon and Knott 301.

²⁷ In the original Abraham is a servant to the Montagues, whereas in Luhmann Abra is a member of the young Capulets' gang. Similarly, Sampson and Gregory, servants to the Capulets in the original, are part of the young Montagues' gang in Luhmann.

²⁸ On clipping see Yule 66.

²⁹ "A name like Paris and you put Dave in front of it. What's that about", wonders bobthegrinch (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114733/usercomments>).

³⁰ On homonymy see Yule 121; on hyponymy see Yule 119-20 and Saeed 68-69.

³¹ On a brief account of Shakespeare's sources of *Romeo and Juliet* see Brian Gibbon's introduction to the Arden edition (32-42).

³² The film contains more Shakespearean puns of the kind in the titles of the adult cd-roms in Tromeo's possession, such as *Much Ado About Humming* and *As You Lick It*. On these puns see Scheib. On similar puns in Luhmann see Baumgarten, Frazer, Fuchs.

³³ O'Connor talks about the anchorwoman's "calm, unemotional commentary" (33). On the anchorwoman also see Rothwell 241 and Westhoff.

of the film once more underscore the omnipresence of the media as the final image pixelates into a television picture. The anchorwoman is back to deliver the epilogue (originally uttered by the Prince), and the film ends when the television set is switched off.

Filming Shakespeare in a modern setting certainly involves problems. But if swords are, as in Luhrmann's film, replaced by guns, if the Prince becomes a police officer, and if the Chorus is transformed into an anchorwoman, the beauty of the Shakespearean language may still be heard. And even if the latter is also distorted, as in Kaufman's movie, parting, after all, really sucks; as for the love story, it's still there, only with a few more juicy details. Such radical changes, of course, do not work for everyone. Still, one can be certain about one thing: they will never harm the Bard.

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