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The Bard with Skin On

Postmodernity in Shakespeare in Love

To say that I am a fan of the works of William Shakespeare would be an understatement. I am a collector of all things Shakespeare, with multiple editions of the plays, sonnets and stories, posters, time-lines and even a blanket with a quote from *The Winter’s Tale*. In May of 2011, I was able to fulfill a lifelong dream of travelling to England to walk in the steps of the Bard, and was able to witness a dress rehearsal for *Much Ado about Nothing* at the restored Globe theatre in Old London. When the actors took to the stage, I was overcome with emotion and very much felt like Viola De Lessups when she explained her love of theatre to the Queen at Greenwich within the film *Shakespeare in Love* (1). For a Shakespeare-nerd like me, it doesn’t get much better than watching a movie such as *Shakespeare in Love*.

I have had a difficult time understanding the definition and implications of postmodernity throughout this class, (and honestly in other classes that my husband J.C. has taken in the Film department). It took *Shakespeare in Love*, a movie that is in my top three favorite films, for me to begin to fully understand postmodernity. Although it seems as if Davis and Womack (2) had their problems with this film being described as anything other than a novelty, I believe that, because a story like Romeo and Juliet is part of the greater consciousness of most film-goers, the meta-narrative and elements of postmodernity are easily accessible the first viewing, and amusing to find upon multiple viewings. *Shakespeare in Love* is a post-modern retelling of Romeo and Juliet that utilizes a dead language and the classical conventions of theatre. The mirroring of Romeo and Juliet with Will and Viola lends a fresh perspective to a nearly 500-year-old story.

I’ve been involved in far too many conversations about Shakespeare that begin with, “Oh I just don’t get that stuff, it doesn’t make sense to me.” It breaks my heart that something so beautiful can be looked at as anything but. I believe this movie can open the door to a whole new generation of Shakespeare enthusiasts due to the accessibility of the story. This accessibility is ultimately reached by presenting the film as a meta-narration, breaking down the more difficult aspects of understanding Shakespeare’s works. No longer is Shakespeare reserved for only the well-read: those that attempt to wade through sometimes muddy waters of Elizabethan language.

It is obvious to me that writers Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard truly loved the works of William Shakespeare, through their multiple references to not only *Romeo and Juliet,* but also *Two Gentlemen of Verona, Hamlet, Twelfth Night, The Tempest, Macbeth*, as well as Shakespeare’s better known sonnets (18 and 130). “By referencing numerous textual, cultural, and historical aspects of ‘Shakespeareana’, moreover, the film continually reminds us that we are witnessing the construction of narrative. In this way, meta-narration ultimately reduces the distance between viewer and text in *Shakespeare in Love*.” (2) This meta-narration explains the layers within the film – the story is being written within the span of the film itself. And because the story is so well-known, (I think you would be hard pressed to encounter someone who hadn’t at least heard of the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*), viewers are able to sit back and relax while the narrative unfolds before them.

Because of the writers’ deep-abiding love for these masterpieces, the film cannot be classified as parody, but rather pastiche. “Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared with which what is being imitated is rather comic.” (3) *Shakespeare in Love* is full of moments of pastiche, adding levity to a rather tragic story that has been accused of being too heavy for mass consumption. One such moment is at the very beginning of the film, with Will crumpling up a piece of paper, and throwing it towards a coffee mug labeled “A Present from Stratford-Upon-Avon,” Shakespeare’s home. Not only does this provide historical context, or a bit of Will’s biography, but it’s something that viewers can all relate to --- who hasn’t received some sort of souvenir that says “…and all I got was this lousy t-shirt”? The fact that this pastiche moment occurs barely five minutes into the film is the writers’ way to put their viewers at ease: This is not the Shakespeare you’re used to.

*Shakespeare in Love* puts skin on the Bard. It is a rare and talented author that is a household name, instead of just the “guy” that wrote their works. Even if it is entirely fictional, the playwrights were able to fashion a story, based off of gathered facts about the man who would be Shakespeare. As viewers, we are able to delve into a world rarely referenced, into his fictional psyche. If its viewers are romantic at heart and enjoy the telling of a tall tale, then this version of Shakespeare’s personal life is not too much of a stretch, and is as good of a story as any. Will is a vulnerable hired player, struggling with writer’s block and is desperate in the arena in love. After meeting Viola de Lessups, he is smitten with a deep, romantic love, calling to his lady underneath her bedroom balcony. We experience the inspiration the story of the star-crossed lovers as Will and Lady Viola, with the River Thames dividing them. We are introduced to Rosaline, Burbage’s seamstress and “the baggage we never even meet” within the play. Christopher ‘Kit’ Marlowe is shown as a friend of Will’s, and responsible for key plot points and the name Mercutio. We are exposed to the hardships of the proprietors of the playhouses, with Mr. Henslowe’s burning feet and Mr. Fennyman’s precise accounting.

The film addresses the conspiracies that say no one William Shakespeare existed in a few ways. First, when we are introduced to Will on-screen, we look over his left shoulder at a scrap piece of paper with a dozen different spellings and signatures of his name. Not only does it imply different authors all using the same pseudonym, it also implies that the Bard may have been illiterate. Second, Viola fashions a question out of desperation in such a way that represents the central question of literary scholars for centuries, “Answer me only this: are you the author of the plays of William Shakespeare?” Third, the screenplay itself “functions upon a multiplicity of voices – *de facto* authors, if you will – who share in the construction of the filmic narrative. Rather than adhering to the modern tradition and representing the Bard as a master-genius who writes in isolation in a literary vacuum, Norman and Stoppard playfully depict a variety of characters as they participate, both implicitly and explicitly, in the composition of Shakespeare’s drama.” (2) This last one is especially intriguing.

From the Puritan preacher calling for a “plague on both their houses” (The Curtain and the Rose), to Viola dreamily summoning “Romeo, Romeo…a young man of Verona” from her balcony, we glimpse into Shakespeare’s writing process and discover that he may be as perceptive as Sherlock Holmes. As the entirety of this movie takes place in less than three weeks --- “a stolen season” according to Viola --- the constant back-and-forth between the writing of *Romeo and Juliet*, juxtaposed against the love affair of Will and Viola seamlessly occurs in some creative ways. *Romeo and Juliet’s* classic wedding night/morning-after scene transpires between Will and Viola after they consummate their own union, arguing about the owl, eventually nightingale. Ned Alleyn (Ben Affleck) points out the missing scene (that has already taken place for the viewers) and we’re lead into a second beautiful portrayal of the same scene: one that ultimately leads to their eventual exposure to Mr. Tilney, Lord Wessex and Queen Elizabeth.

The meta-narration within the film may has the potential of being confusing on the pages of the original screenplay, but on screen, is executed flawlessly betwixt the nights spent in Viola’s bedroom and upon the stage of The Rose. The gender play between not only Thomas Kent and his unsuspecting fellow actors, but also Will assuming the role of Juliet in order for Viola/Thomas to continue to practice her role as Romeo. The gender bending comes to an end as the play is performed at The Curtain, with her spectators gasping when Viola, still in her wedding dress, assumes the role of Juliet, with Will as her Romeo. The mirroring of these four characters reaches the pinnacle, with Will and Viola knowing their stolen season is at an end, when she will sail with the evening tide. Not only do Will and Viola throw caution to the wind as their love-affair is beheld on the stage for all to see, but Hugh Fennyman and Richard Burbage put their names and necks on the line for allowing a woman to grace the stage: an act of lewdness, according to the Master of the Revels.

Similar to the events of Romeo and Juliet’s courtship, the love affair of Will and Viola highlights that even a brief and ultimately mortal spell can last throughout all time. In their parting moments, Viola instructs Will to “write [her] well,” with the Bard commenting that Viola will “be [his] heroine for all time.” They both realize that while their mortal relationship has come to an end, all will end well for love. (1)

Voyeuristically, we are given a glimpse into the supposed writing process of a legend, experiencing first-hand the “very truth and nature of love.” (1) *Shakespeare in Love* brings levity and lightheartedness to the tragic story of a pair of star-crossed lovers within the two households of The Curtain and the Rose. Having Will and Viola stand in for Romeo and Juliet helps explain the nearly 500 year old story and the titular characters. Not only does this movie put skin on the Bard, but also makes the young couple of Verona more easily relatable. “Reading the narrative of *Shakespeare in Love* in the context of postmodern humanism’s philosophy of textual creation illuminates our innate desires for belief, for wonder, for transcending the unfathomable void, and for fabulating our own brave new imaginary worlds.” (2) A great river divides the mirrored lovers --- be it the River Thames, the class system, or quarreling families and playhouses, but ultimately we leave the film with a sense of hope and wonder knowing that the two couples will continue to love and live on through poetry and prose (and film!) for all time.

**Sources**:

1. *Shakespeare in Love, by Marc Norman & Tom Stoppard*. Dir. John Madden. Perf. Joseph Fiennes, Gwenyth Paltrow. Universal, 1999. DVD.
2. Davis, Todd F., and Kenneth Womack. "Reading (and Writing) the Ethics of Authorship: Shakespeare in Love as Postmodern Metanarrative." *Literature Film Quarterly*. Print.
3. Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." (n.d.): n. pag. Rpt. in *Critical Visions in Film Theory*. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011. 1033-039. Print.