

QUESTIONING THE HETERONORMATIVE VOICE: THE POLITICS OF CONTEXT IN ALAN BROWN'S *PRIVATE ROMEO*

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet is a play replete with violence and desire present in the adolescent experience of love. It captures the ethos of mania that surround love in an age where the young minds begin to form a schema of the world around them and love becomes the focal point for this often rebellious interaction with familial structures, society, culture and sexual conventions. For this reason the play has been widely adapted into films and plays, which find new ways of engagement with the Shakespeare's canonical text. A wide range of film adaptations have engaged in intertextual exchange with the text. One such adaptation is Alan Brown's Private Romeo, highlighting a gay relationship at the center of the play, displacing a heteronormative paradigm. The film portrays a version of the play that embraces gender and sexual diversity as a norm.

KEYWORDS: *Film Adaptation, Queer, Heteronormativity, Shakespeare*

INTRODUCTION

Alan Brown's film *Private Romeo*, a take on *Romeo and Juliet*, figures as a revolt against the centuries old silencing of homocentric aspects of the play. The politics of personal sexual and romantic desire versus institutional authority becomes the center of his reimagining of the text. He is able to bring out various tenets of gay sexual identity while tracing the Shakespearean trope of forbidden love. The context of a suppressed love maintains fidelity with the text and allows for assertion of 'queer' identity. The film maker underlines his struggle with sexual politics of marking gay identity on screen and the bodies of the actors "as a gay man a generation removed from theirs, I couldn't teach them how to inhabit teenage characters that had the courage to act on their sexual and romantic convictions. Nor how to play the friends of those characters who were less (or not at all) bothered by the "coming out" of their cadet friends than by how this unexpected revelation and romance affected the group."

Alan Brown's *Private Romeo*, highlights a gay relationship at the center of the play, displacing a heteronormative paradigm. The film portrays a version of the play that embraces gender and sexual diversity as a norm. The actors perform the same gender pronouns as part of the original text and there is no cross-dressing device to accommodate the female identity of the original characters. The isolation in the academy and its distance from the outside world lead to the establishment of an internal model of society composed of the students and the teachers. Additionally it lays down its own conventions of expected social behavior which set forth the interaction of various characters in the play. The drama remains in sync with the heightened poignancy of teenage experience with love. The events of the film feature a similar tragic effect and life and death experience for the characters in motion, bearing the same weight as the Shakespearean play.

The film is based in an all-male service school called McKinley Military Academy. The reenactment of the play in the classroom rolls out to become a reflection of their lives, amidst which blossoms a gay love between the two cadets, Sam Singleton (Romeo) and Glenn Mangan (Juliet). The film is mediated on 'Don't ask, don't tell', the official United States policy on gays serving in the military, which allowed the closeted gay and lesbian individuals to serve in the military while barring the openly gay/lesbian people. The law was discriminatory against homosexuals and was repealed after the release of the film.

The film is based on Joe Calarco's play *Shakespeare's R&J*, which is set in the context of a private, military school, in which four boys start acting out *Romeo and Juliet* for their private enjoyment, and through their reading discover themselves and their sexualities. Calarco elaborates from the beginning that the concept of an all-male cast itself supposes homoerotic themes, and the setting of a contemporary, restrictive school demands that homophobia be addressed. Thus, he subverts the conceit of the all-male cast, which historically is not acknowledged on stage. Where the all-male cast usually relies on cross-dressing to pretend to be an accurate representation of reality, Calarco acknowledges the abnormality and dispensability of this casting choice in contemporary theatre in the absence of any additional reasons to do it. Calarco asserts that there are many "bad ways" to make an all-male adaptation, presumably referring to the misogynistic issues associated with not giving women a role to play. For him, one cannot justify doing an all-male production without a good reason to, simply because one wants. Furthermore, choosing an all-male setting to go with the casting choice, rather than relying on cross-dressing actors to play the female roles, makes the homoeroticism less incidental, and creates the need to acknowledge and work with it, rather than letting it be part of the subtext. Calarco's play relies on a play within the play, allowing for the context of the school to be developed.

The strong adherence to Shakespeare's language in the film, such as in the layers of meanings deposited on the seemingly one layered language, puns and insertion of monologues, runs parallel to the manifestation of homosexual desire. The language specifically becomes a vehicular disposition of the adding homosexual connotations to the theme of forbidden love, which exonerates the same value for every human being. The lines spoken by Glenn Mangan (Juliet) at 00:29:05, make "rose" a symbol for love in its various forms whether queer or straight in its sexual orientation. It can be interpreted to bridge a connection with the shame that comes to denote gay desire in the societal fabric and how it stands to demonize gay people. It rejects the enterprise of labeling love and individuals which propagate homophobia and unjust biases. Critics such as Harry Levin argue that language is a tool that has been called on to challenge 'all names, forms, conventions, sophistications and arbitrary dictates of society' (Levin 45). Juliet's asking 'What's in a name?' (2.1.86) becomes significantly threatening to the regulations placed on love, specifically gay love, which is visibly present in the queer version Brown presents. The astute representation of rejection of heteronormative paradigms dictating queer love is inherent in the act of challenging the "names" (00:29:05) or in this context the labels assigned by the society which forbid queer love. The opposition of the peers at the academy is evident in the dialogues spoken by Josh Neff (Mercutio) and Gus Sanchez (Benvolio) "Blind is his love and best befits the dark" and "If love be blind, it cannot hit the mark" (00:26:46 – 00:26:56), showing the marginality of homosexual discourses.

The film maker's ability to visualize a queer *Romeo and Juliet* highlights the gaps in the original text which can be utilized to read the text as inhabiting a more universal and inclusive love. It also could be taken to assess a longing for acceptance. Juliet's mediation to change Romeo's name can be argued to be a plea for the discarding of the prejudiced label that their love has, such as when Glen Mangan implores "Romeo, doff thy name" (00:29:24). Gillian Woods in the

assessment of Levin's comments claims that Juliet is aware of the 'dangerous breach of social decorum' and her evaluation of the aberration is marked in the words: 'I would not for the world they saw thee here' (2.1.117). The regulatory forces governing sexual or romantic relationships that permeate the society are consciously present here.

Michael Goldman in his *Shakespeare and the Energies of Drama* lays down a structure of verbal interplay in *Romeo and Juliet*, focusing specifically on the interchange between Romeo and Juliet. He elaborates '*Romeo and Juliet* is a tragedy of naming, a tragedy in which at times Romeo's name seems to be the villain' (Goldman 35). This observation can open pathways to explore how biases towards homosexuality function. There are various points of intersection between the text and the experience of gay love. We find Juliet fantasizing about a world without names. Glenn Mangan (Juliet) in the film hiding in a dark room, trying to avoid the persecution by his own peers following the first act of declaration of homosexual inclination in the remaking of the balcony scene, finds himself calling Sam Singleton (Romeo) to 'doff thy name, and for that name which is no part of thee, take all myself' (00:29:20). His declaration of names as obsolete and sans carrying any essential significance becomes symbolic of the desire for freedom and acceptance of gay individuals. Romeo however is more aware of the danger they pose. His 'coming out' in the film is a step which poses threat to him and his remaining in the closet and 'out of favour of love' in the opening scenes of the film (00:02:10) is symptomatic of his dreadful attunement to his marginalized position. Learning that Juliet is grieving for her murdered cousin, Romeo gains a deep insight and cries in the play: (swinging back and forth without coherence)

As if that name,
 Shot from the deadly level of a gun,
 Did murder her, as that name's cursèd hand
 Murdered her kinsman. O tell me, Friar, tell me,
 In what vile part of this anatomy
 Doth my name lodge? Tell me, that I may sack
 The hateful mansion. (3.3.101-7)

Romeo understands the cultural association and entanglement of love with a system of appropriation and marginalization. The meanings carried by names hold bearers responsible for things, for which they are not. Regardless of this, they indicate a person's history and crimes. Homosexuality has for a long period been criminalized and thus the people of non-heteronormative identity cannot pursue a relationship without the fear of being penalized for it by administrative authorities. "Ha, banishment! Be merciful and say 'death'!" (01:02:18) uttered by Sam Singleton (Romeo) indicate the way in which homosexuality is denied social sanctions or acceptance to manifest itself. Romeo desires to undo such a name that obstructs his evincing his real identity. His rejection of names gives it a 'peculiar substantiality' and an agency. Thus 'name' has a physical presence in the text and the film both.

Catherine Belsey discusses in 'The Name of the Rose in *Romeo and Juliet*', how the tragic flaw in the text is of being assigned culturally premeditated divisive names. She goes on to argue how the course of Romeo and Juliet's love was predetermined by a cultural language, which only ends with a failure of this forbidden love (Belsey 130). Their names do not allow for averting a tragic end in a culture obsessed with signification of names and in deriving the outcomes that

erupt from such cultural enterprise of naming. Romeo's refusal of his name can only give him a new love but it cannot strip his name away to be un-named. Romeo cannot exist in a state of namelessness and must offer an alternative name. 'Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized. / Hence forth I never will be Romeo' (2.1.93-4). These lines are also present in the film (00:29:34), signifying an overlap with the text. The signification of the lines in the film causes one to question the constricted view of a heterosexual love which marginalizes gay love. Queer love is entangled in a similar web of associations and a possible way to transcend the bounds of panopticon hold of homophobia is through a cultural reevaluation of formulated ideology concerning sexual identities and its norms, whether it is the patriarchal order or the catholic control.

Queer space has often been riddled with secrecy and morphing into heterosexism to avoid being instigated for the termed 'deviant' sexual behavior. The longing for escape and the hinted seclusion of Glenn Mangan and Sam Singleton in various frames of the film is evident "Not I, believe me: you have dancing shoes/ With nimble soles: I have a soul of lead/ So stakes me to the ground, I cannot move" (00:17:36 – 00:17:46). The characters' closeted status can only operate in secrecy. The initial frames highlight trauma and anguish, which itself can be a meta-narrative of queer experience. The secret world of the students in Calarco's work transposes this instinct of the text more profoundly. Additionally a body of critics has discussed the presence of such similar and overlapping constructs in the Shakespearean work. Woods recalls a depiction of 'tragic selfhood' in *Romeo and Juliet*. He reveals in it the 'tragedy of the unsounded self', which he uses to account for a 'self with a private interiority that is at odds with the imperatives of the outside world' (Woods 17). The lovers are put through separation several times in this trial for their forbidden love. This has a concrete intersection with the film's narrative of the characters' visible solitude and inability to find expression of love in claims such as 'out of love' and 'out of favor in love' (00:02:05).

According to James L. Calderwood, the lovers' in Shakespeare's drama face a linguistic seclusion which flowers into a cause for their tragedy (Calderwood 92). Their private love, consolidated in a formal bond by the means of a secret marriage never gains social acceptance. In the film and particularly in the context of homosexual relationships, marriage is not a possibility (gay marriage was illegal in USA at the time of the film's release). Without the public validation and recognition, gay identity and love remains on the periphery of the social establishment. This is a unique problem that erupts in the reimagining of the text which highlights the double closeted status of queer relationships. Calderwood also notes the imbalance between the impact of private and public words in the play by Shakespeare. The word 'banished', as uttered by the Prince has been repeated nineteen times in the text and is the key to shaping the tragedy that the heterosexual Romeo and Juliet get immersed in. The word banished also echoes the subjugation and control placed on homosexuals across different cultures. It can be an appropriate metaphor for the society's treatment, which is received by people of queer identity.

In addition to cultural, social and religious connotations, in homosexual discourse there is always a political undercurrent. Since the discrimination towards queer people is propagated through political tools, the discourse can never be free of a political valency. Michael Warner addresses that "same-sex people kissing, embracing, or holding hands in public view commonly excite disgust even to the point of violence, whereas mixed-sex persons doing the same things are invisibly ordinary, even applauded" (Warner 12). The film adaptation by Brown is conscious of its geographical and historical setting. It carries forward the politics that surround queer people serving in USA military forces and the prejudiced viability of their free and validated ownership of their sexual identity. In a similar context, Kiernan Ryan in his

analysis of the Shakespearean tragedy contends a political 'value' that the play is charged with (Ryan 107). There is a contradiction effervescent in the tragedy 'between justified desires and their unjustifiable suppression'. This tension is a reminder for the audience of the discarded potential and how lives are laid wasted in the tramples between the society and individual agency. With the aid of such a catharsis, the play produces the tragedy. The movie subverts the ending which exits with the deaths of the protagonists Romeo and Juliet by giving a chance for Sam and Glenn to live out a more positive cognizance of their love. Sam (Romeo) is revived from death by Glenn (Juliet) and the tragic death is averted.

Timelessness of love is one of the central themes of Shakespeare's canonical play *Romeo and Juliet*. Romeo and Juliet's love becomes a breakage point in the perennial enmity that their families had. Their love becomes canonized and a cause for peace in the violent relationship that Capulets and Montagues share. They die, yet their love lives on through the resolution it brings. Hence it is not surprising that critics such as Ryan have dedicated much of their energies elaborating on timelessness in the discourse of the play. The tragedy in the play persists in the course of 'mistimings', as Woods voices in the assessment of Ryan's work on the play (Woods 85). This is inhabited in the instances such as where Balthazar is able to speak to Romeo before Friar Laurence. It can also be navigated in the historical time they exist in and its diktat of administering social realities. This historical moment, which is of Elizabethan England, is significant in producing the conditions in which the tragedy occurs. In another historical timeline, such a tragedy can be averted if the social and cultural conditions are more favorable. The historical specificity has much value in Ryan's remarks, which strongly emphasize against the critical approaches that view the tragedy to be an encompassing plight of humanity. He is particularly suspicious of opinions which gauge the young lovers to be the victims of natural law or chance or any self-destructive ideations that might be thought to be associated with the lovers. All these appraisals to a large extent accept the appropriateness of the tragedy. They widely recognize the ending to be inevitable. But Ryan believes that the tragedy of the play lies in how it could have been evaded. This awareness itself is the cause for the audience's poignant reception of the tragic end. This is the argument which Brown's version of *Romeo and Juliet* inherits and intercepts as a favorable microcosm where *Private Romeo* can come to life. The vilification of queer people is an avoidable alternative. There is a possibility that in the context of the film, the attitude of the culture or the social conditions in which gay people have to live can be improved and the heteronormativity can be questioned. This is the tragedy that the historical specificity of *Private Romeo* produces. It is aware of the dynamics of the social politics that the culture has undergone since the times of Shakespeare, as visible in the theatrical conventions of cross dressing male actors and homosexuality having a more open reception. Bevington argues that "the assigning of women's parts to boy actors gave Shakespeare a rich opportunity to sport dramatically with sexual ambiguity and to interrogate gender differences" (Bevington 39).

The cultural framework is in strong opposition to queer relationships, as it stigmatizes them at political, social and cultural levels. The reciprocation of love and its mutuality do not subsume any importance in this system which is predicated on dissimilarities in its reception of heterosexual and homosexual love. The film portrays the unjust biases and stigmatization of homosexuality, furthering more space to the visualization of young adult relationships. It treats the subject of gay romance with sensitivity. Brown's *Private Romeo* inserts a world without adults as a context for the adaptation. Ryan too asserts the celebration of mutuality within love. It is coupled with alleging the 'right to love whoever one chooses, regardless of arbitrary prohibitions or prejudice'. The love being forbidden adds the pathos and the representation of social outlook to the film. Despite being presented in an isolated military camp; it is able to capture the forces at work outside its setting and place. The lovers cannot escape the discourses surrounding their geographical

pinpoint, whether it is Verona or McKinley Military Academy, as Ryan states that ‘they are caged in a culture which precludes the survival of such emancipated love’. Shakespeare’s text is a romantic tragedy with a vital possibility of critiquing an unfavorable society, which offers institutional opposition to homosexuality. Ryan further states ‘By sundering the lovers from the discourse that defines them, Shakespeare shows their plight to be man-made and mutable, the local imposition of a transient culture....In the estranged idiom of the lovers can be read the tragedy’s estrangement from its era, the imprint of its commerce with futurity.’

In terms of visualization of the sodomitc sexual act, which is a key marker to clearly imply a gay union violating any misconceptions of a platonic love, Glenn Mangan and Sam Singleton in *Private Romeo* act out the marriage consummation scene (01:06:20). Similarly the sexual hysteria displayed by the students in *Shakespeare’s R&J* manifests gay desire openly. The acts themselves are a radical assertion of gay identity and are able to capture the romantic intimacy the characters develop. It fills a space, a void in our visual culture, where a normalized gay love should exist. For Shakespeare’s Juliet’s sexual desire is, in Belsey’s words, a longing to ‘obscure even the signifying practices of the virgin body’, while consummation is figured as ‘pure sensation, sightless, speechless organisms in conjunction, flesh on flesh, independent of the signifier’ (Belsey 49). This fantasy or ‘symbolic order’ remains beyond signification for Juliet and can only remain in that form, as Juliet’s highly figurative description shows. The similarity here between a gay fantasy or desire of the act of love and Juliet’s conception of it is paramount. It shows the overlapping of interplay of signification in the play and the reimagined context in Brown’s adaptation.

The urgency and heightened poignancy of the suppressed queer desire present in visual frames in *Private Romeo* becomes as emotive as the words that the characters echo in the usage of Shakespeare’s verse dialogues. The film uses hand held cameras and different forms of color saturation to create such effects. The scenes of their everyday life are toned down and muted while there is a greater depth of color and warmer tones in scenes which utilize Shakespearean verse. The forbidden pursuit of this kind of love, which struggles with the anxiety of upcoming social denial in its path, makes the play naturally suitable to a ‘queer’ reinterpretation. This is also an equivocal aspect of gay identity as sexuality comes to be closeted in the lack of speech to voice the gay desire, due to which the text of *Romeo and Juliet* is suitable to highlight queer experience. The entire seeming cultural invisibility of gay identity posed by queer erasure in art and literature is the sign of changed world which has moved from dismissal or frown to scorn towards the homosexual individuals.

The ongoing critical commentary on *Romeo and Juliet* and the re-invention of text with the medium of such film and literary adaptations revitalizes the iconic status the text enjoys. The text continues to be a major cultural and literary locus, and has undergone transformations by the means of indigenization of the play across the globe. The fresh emerging enquiries have allowed for new meanings to be found and established as well as Shakespeare’s genius to be celebrated with a more enhanced perception of the text. The only fear we must share should be of highly reductive analyses, which undercut the fervor present in the text, by terming it simply as a story of two young lovers. We have no record of the original production to substantiate Shakespeare’s authorial intent but the creative and literary enterprises ensure that *Romeo and Juliet*, and by extension the remediation offered by *Private Romeo*, will stand as a significant strand of time. Brown’s sensibility of his own experiences as a gay film maker, resound the film, creating a powerful echo of empathetic call for ‘queer’ visibility. His film majorly inspired by Calarco’s play presents a queer reading of the text which dismantles the heterosexual delineation of the text. Their voices transcend the heteronormative bounds.

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