

Retrieving Gay Canon: Queer Shakespeare

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare has been a touchstone in our cultural evaluations of canon since its formation. The range and depth of his work has allowed it to be a recipient of critical attention and interpretation for centuries. Despite the pronounced homoerotic elements of the theatrical conventions of Shakespeare's times, the bard's texts have been read and interpreted from a heteronormative conception of sexuality and gender relations. This has led to erasure and nullifying of the possibility of a Shakespearean understanding of the texts which permeates the gender fluidity that it encapsulates. *Romeo and Juliet* has been canonized in a manner to serve the trope of heterosexual identities and gender binaries. But adaptations offer a site for reinvestigation of the text and have allowed for more pluralistic meanings to arise, such as visible in Joe Calarco's play *Shakespeare's R&J* and Alan Brown's film *Private Romeo*. The microcosms presented by these texts highlight how the canon is yet to discover Shakespeare truly. Attacking the heteronormative ethos of the Western canon, Eve Kosofsky Sedwick poignantly asks in her *Epistemology of the Closet*, "Has there ever been a gay Shakespeare?" Her claims subtly posit the hegemonic exclusion of the spectrum of sexual identities by the keepers of a dead canon while simultaneously asserting their perpetual presence in the form of centrally canonical figures.

Keywords: gay canon, queer reading, *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare

Lee Edelman deliberates in his introduction to *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (1994) the manner in which "homosexual identity" is ascertained through processes of assimilation and its shape in the "tradition of Western metaphysics" (Edelman 9). He extends this argument to include the role of Western culture at large in such an interchange. This opens up the possibility of unleashing the radical sway of gay writing, as he contends that gay writing has the means to deconstruct "the binary logic of sexual difference on which symbolic identity is based, effectively disrupting the cognitive stability" of culture itself (12). Gay identity thus figures as a mode of resistance to the heteronormativity of the Western tradition and it dismantles the tradition from within itself. Barry Weller strongly asserts that "gay or queer criticism has signaled, from the outset, that its project entails not the examination of a circumscribed canon of gay-centered or gay-identified texts but a rereading of the way in which the entire body of Anglo-American literature and beyond-delineates among other things the boundaries of sexual identity, the norms of sexual behavior, the grotesque and classically desirable body, and the terms of social inclusion and exile" (Weller 279). The emergence of an alternate gay canon reminds one of marginalized discourses and groups finding a voice in the mainstream tradition and culture. The predetermined heterosexual concerns find subversion and resistance through such modes of writing and re-reading.

Eve Kosofsky Sedwick posits a rhetorical question in her *Epistemology of the Closet*, as a stratagem to counter the "arrogant intent of maintaining ignorance" of "the keepers of a dead canon". "From the point of view of this relatively new and inchoate academic presence, then, the gay studies movement, what distinctive soundings are to be reached by posing the question our way-and staying for an answer? Let's see how it sounds.

Has there ever been a gay Socrates?
Has there ever been a gay Shakespeare?
Has there ever been a gay Proust?
Does the Pope wear a dress?

If these questions startle, it is not least as tautologies. A short answer, though a very incomplete one, might be that not only have there been a gay Socrates, Shakespeare, and Proust but that their names are Socrates, Shakespeare, and Proust; and, beyond that, legion-dozens or hundreds of the most centrally canonic figures in what the monoculturalists are pleased to call "our" culture, as indeed, always in different forms and senses, in every other." (Sedwick 51-52)

Thus, the conclusion is that there is no gay writing that is noncanonical. Despite the conventions of Shakespeare's time which were able to trace the homoerotic aspects of sexuality by the device of cross-dressing male actors, the intersection of homosexual and 'queer' identity with theater did not sustain the tides of time. Michelle M. Sauer states "In Shakespeare's time, it would probably have been performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men. As such, the most likely candidate for the first Romeo would have been Richard Burbage, who was the company's leading actor" (Sauer 679). Such conventions reflecting the fluidity that immasks the practice of gender as a whole no longer resonate with the heteronormative voice that overshadowed the reception and evaluation of the author's work in the later centuries. What remains essential to note in this exercise is how this was the formulation of the homophobia of the hetero culture and society's casting out of characters and individuals who showed queer inclinations. Michel Foucault documents this movement of the dominant culture towards such ideology when he contends sexuality became something to be regulated and administered and not merely judged. He goes on to say 'Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.'

Thus Alan Brown's take on *Romeo and Juliet* becomes 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."

Calarco's play *Shakespeare's R&J* 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 acknowledges 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 acknowledges the many "bad ways" to make an all-male adaptation, presumably referring to the misogynistic issues associated with not giving women a role to play (Calarco 4). 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.

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 cause for an internal model of society to be made among the students and the teachers and lays down its own conventions of expected social behavior which set forth the interaction of various characters in the play. The drama remains true to the heightened poignancy of teenage experience with love. The events of the film become a life and death experience for the characters in motion, carrying 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 the mirror 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 baring the openly gay/lesbian people. The law was highly discriminatory against people of homosexual orientation.

The remarkable adherence to Shakespeare's language such as 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 gay theme of love, which exonerates the same value for every human being. The lines spoken by Glenn Mangan (Juliet), make "rose" a symbol for love in its various forms whether queer or straight in its sexual orientation. It bridges 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'. 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 queer version Brown presents us. This astute vein of the text and the film maker's ability to visualize a queer *Romeo and Juliet* highlight the gaps in the original text which can be utilized to read the text as 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. 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 civilizing forces that permeate the society are fully present here.

Michael Goldman in his *Shakespeare and the Energies of Drama*, Goldman 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 opens pathways to explore how biases towards homosexuality function. There are various points of intersection between the text and the gay experience of 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'. Her 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 is symptomatic of his this dreadful attunement to his marginalized position. Learning that Juliet is grieving for her murdered cousin, Romeo gains a deep insight and cries:

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 really long period been criminalized and thus the people of non-heteronormative identity cannot pursue a relationship without being penalized for it by administrative authorities. 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 their 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 unnamed. Romeo cannot exist in a state of namelessness and must offer an alternative name. 'Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized. / Henceforth I never will be Romeo' (2.1.93-4). 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 the only 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 been riddled with secrecy and morphing into heterosexism to avoid being instigated for the termed 'deviant' sexual behavior. The longing for escape and the present hinted seclusion of Glenn Mangan and Sam Singleton in various frames of the film is self-evident. The characters display quietude and the initial melancholy is itself a meta-narrative of queer experience. The secret world of the students in Calarco's work transposes this instinct of the text more profoundly. Woods recalls a depiction of 'tragic selfhood' in the Shakespearean play. Goldman reveals in Shakespeare's play 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'.

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 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 shading 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 becomes a metaphor for the treatment of society that is received by people of queer identity.

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. The film adaptation by Brown is conscious of its placement 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. Kiernan Ryan in his analysis of the Shakespearean tragedy contends a political 'value' that the play is charged with. There is a contradiction effervescent in the tragedy 'between justified desires and their unjustifiable suppression' (Ryan 107). This tension is a reminder for the audience of the wasted 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 positive cognizance of their love.

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 that 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 and masses at large or the 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 much more aware of the dynamics of the social politics that the culture has undergone since the times of Shakespeare, when homophilia was not something to be feared, in the theatrical conventions of cross dressing male actors and homosexuality having a more open reception. Franco Zeffirelli, the film maker behind another adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* was lauded for the depiction of the youthful agency and passion, while negating any assumptions of pacifism. He too was sensitive to the historical accuracy and authenticity of the period in his filmic adaptation.

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 aptly 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. 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 and despite being presented in an isolated military camp; it is able to capture the forces at work outside the setting and place. The lovers cannot escape the discourses surrounding their geographical pinpoint, whether it is Verona or McKinley Military Academy, as 'they are caged in a culture which precludes the survival of such emancipated love'. Shakespeare thus is narrating a love story, simultaneously critiquing an unfavorable society which offers institutional opposition to homosexuality. He 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 sodomitic 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. 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 delicate 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 profound. It shows the overlapping of interplay of signification in the play and the reimagined context in Brown's adaptation.

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 and 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 love story of two young lovers. Of the original production, we have no record 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 the test 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 extends a queer reading of the text which dismantles the heterosexual delineation of the text. Their voices transcend the heteronormative bounds.

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