

**REINSCRIBING SEXUALITY:  
MANGA VERSIONS OF *ROMEO AND JULIET***

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***Abstract:** Designed to familiarize the younger audience with the Bard's work, while at the same time catering to their tastes and interests, not only have Shakespearean adaptations moved the original plots to unusual milieus and exotic cultures, but have also 'translated' them to new media. This paper analyzes the portrayal of sexuality in two transmediations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The paper compares and contrasts two manga versions of the play (a British and a Japanese one), aiming to highlight the ways in which the "star crossed lovers'" relationship has been adapted and appropriated by the two cultures in the twenty-first century.*

***Keywords:** gender, manga, *Romeo and Juliet*, sexuality*

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, critics (Lanier 2002:3-4, Shaughnessy 2007:1-2) have argued that popular culture is a powerful force, which has created a broader audience not only for highbrow Shakespeare, but also for a multitude of lowbrow Shakespeares. In their opinion, popular culture constantly recycles Shakespeare, appropriating, readapting and reinventing his work at the crossroads of cultural studies, literature, and theatre/ cinema studies.

Given the intensification of visual culture in Western countries, coupled with the fact that the younger generation nowadays shows little

interest in the classics, a new publishing house was set up: “SelfMadeHero”. Their main goal was to introduce teenagers or first-time readers of Shakespeare to the Bard’s work via a medium they easily understood and enjoyed: *manga* (Hayley 2010:267-268), the Japanese version of a graphic novel. Thus, drawing on the conventions of the manga genre (to be explained in the next section) and Shakespeare’s language, “Manga Shakespeare” was born. Much like *Shakespeare: The Animated Tales*, broadcast in the early 1990s, the “Manga Shakespeare” series seeks to educate the audience into appreciating Shakespeare by presenting his work as “a cultural artifact available to all” (Holland 2007:44).

What this paper aims to explore is how two such transmediations adapt Shakespeare’s famous *Romeo and Juliet* in terms of sexuality and depiction of gender from two very different cultural viewpoints: British versus Japanese.

## 2. “Manga Shakespeare”

In 1996 the film *Romeo + Juliet*, directed by Baz Luhrmann, recorded a tremendous box office success, preserving Shakespeare’s poetic language but modernizing the socio-cultural reality from 16<sup>th</sup> century Verona to late 20<sup>th</sup> century Verona Beach, replacing swords with firearms, and touching on other sensitive issues such as transsexuality and queerness through the character of Mercutio. This film opened the door to an influx of modern adaptations and spin-offs of Shakespeare’s work, and “Manga Shakespeare” seems to have followed in its footsteps.

In the context of the intensification of visual culture and the constant increase of manga popularity outside Japan’s borders, the new and innovative concept of “Manga Shakespeare” became famous in Britain and

worldwide once with the 2007 launch of a new graphic novel imprint – “SelfMadeHero” (Hayley 2010:267). Even if the main aim of these mangas was for them to be read for entertainment rather than educational purposes, “Manga Shakespeare” soon enjoyed such great popularity that they became teaching tools and were considered for inclusion in the national curricula of Malaysia (Hayley 2010:278).

Today, Shakespeare’s greatness is often attributed to the artistic value, the poeticity and sophistication of his language. As Weissbrod (2006:49-51) remarks, this is one of the reasons why many adaptations modernize the socio-cultural reality but preserve the original text, which is often abridged and reorganized. The transfer of the plots and messages to another genre and medium – such as the manga – encourages creativity and deviation, an ‘updating’ to our contemporary values and ideas.

Given that Shakespeare’s work is meant to be seen, manga functions as a partial intersemiotic translation or, in other words, as reversed ekphrasis (Brînzeu 2005:247-248). However, manga is not entirely visual, but contains words organized into sentences and even renderings of onomatopoeic sounds. The manga illustrator thus acts as a mediator between two different codes, transferring verbal information into visual signs, which complete each other. The manga illustrator has to perform three operations: selection, description and interpretation of information, which makes him a visible ‘translator’/ conveyor of message, since the reader is biased by the illustrator’s interpretation of the message. Despite being incomplete processes, argues Brînzeu (2005:253), both ekphrasis and reversed ekphrasis shape an experimental translational strategy, generating a feeling of unexpectedness that stems from the creative combination of words and images.

Here is an overview of manga characteristics. Usually drawn in black and white, manga also brings on its own aesthetics and conventions (Johnson-Woods 2010:5-12, Cohn 2010:192-194), some of which are easily identifiable, particularly with regard to *shōjo manga* (targeted at girls): characters usually have large eyes, big perfect hair, elongated limbs and pointy chins, while male characters are highly feminized. The focus is on sensibility and emotions, which can sometimes be highly encoded; for example, a gigantic sweat drop appears on top of a character's head when s/he is embarrassed, or, when the character is angry or frustrated, s/he becomes a *chibi*, i.e. deformed in size, with stylized features and pointy teeth. Although the narrative flow may often be simplistic, the frames usually contain a lot of details that dwarf the character. Moreover, the number of frames varies from one page to another, providing the reader with cinematic angles ranging from long shots to close-ups, and from aerial view to high or low-angle shots, which are impossible to achieve in a theatre performance. Unlike films, the manga shows the moving object statically, with lines streaming behind it (Cohn 2010:193), its power coming from the sequence of frames which “window the attention” to various parts of the narrative through a combination of “macros” (presenting the entire scene), “monos” (showing individuals), “micros” (focusing on details), and “polymorphic panels” (representing whole actions by showing the character at various points in the event) (Cohn 2010:197).

A significant characteristic of manga is its treatment of sexuality. As explicit references to sexual intercourse and description of genitalia are forbidden in Japanese culture, they are touched upon by means of non-conventional visual symbols or metaphors, which appear in the background and suggest mood (Cohn 2010:192). For instance, sexual intercourse may

often be insinuated through falling blossoming flowers, usually cherry flowers, or their petals. Other, more obscure, graphic signs are: bloody noses – connoting lust –, or the lengthening of the area between the nose and the lips – suggesting sexual thoughts (Cohn 2010:192).

As mentioned above, unlike a mere reading of Shakespearean texts, manga allows readers to actually experience the plot visually. Although frozen in still images, Shakespeare's characters contribute to the reader's illusion that s/he is watching a (somewhat broken) film. With a focus primarily on the entertainment of younger generations, the manga versions chosen for analysis emphasize once again the contemporary nature of Shakespeare's plays, creatively (and critically) adapting the cultural capital of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup>.

The two transmediations proposed for discussion here – *Romeo and Juliet* (Appignanesi and Leong 2010) and *Romeo x Juliet* (COM 2010), respectively – have been chosen for two main reasons: on the one hand, they convey two different perspectives on, as well as genre approaches to, Shakespeare's work: drama vs. fantasy/ fairy-tale. On the other hand, they represent two culturally encoded ways of reading a classic, yet worldwide famous, English story.

The starting point for both mangas is Shakespeare's original written text, which is adapted both in terms of language and socio-cultural reality, as the transfer to another medium encourages deviation from the original setting and/or plot. Thus, if the British *Romeo and Juliet* shows from the very title that it remains faithful to Shakespeare's words in an abridged version, preserving its literariness and poetry, the Japanese *Romeo x Juliet* indicates a looser adaptation of Shakespeare's play, with only a slight

influence of early modern language and a great deal of intertextual references to other Shakespearean texts.

The only colourful pages in both mangas – the *dramatis personae* section – introduce us to two different socio-cultural realities: the British version locates the story in modern-day Tokyo, with Romeo and Juliet belonging to warring Yakuza clans, whereas the Japanese version places the narrative in the fantasy city of Neo Verona, on a magical floating island recalling Prospero's realm. Otherwise, the black and white images complete the story, increasing the tension and dramatic effect. If the reality conveyed is different, why should the narrative pattern remain the familiar one? Let us explore in the next section the things that differ in the two mangas as compared to Shakespeare's original storyline.

### **3. *Romeo and Juliet*: From the 16<sup>th</sup> Century to the 21<sup>st</sup>**

The most striking difference between the two mangas discussed here is that, unlike the British version, which reads from left to right, in Western-like fashion, the Japanese one follows its own traditional script and reads backwards (for a Westerner), from right to left, i.e. from the end of the book towards the beginning. Also, whereas the British manga has numbered pages, the Japanese one does not include page numbers but divides the plot into nine sections: eight acts plus a final one.

Sonia Leong (*Romeo and Juliet* 2010), the illustrator of the British manga, moves the action from the 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian cities of Verona and Mantua to the 21<sup>st</sup> century Shibuya and Mantua districts of Tokyo; yet, while the former district is real, the latter is (to the best of my knowledge) fictional. The very first page of the *dramatis personae* section shows the two warring families actually pulling the two star-crossed lovers apart: on

the left there is fashionable Juliet held back by her frowning, kimono-wearing mother and her authoritarian, threatening, Western suit-clad father, while on the right there is rock-star-looking Romeo pulled back by his accusing, conservatively dressed father and his blond, pink miniskirt-wearing mother. Although the majority of the characters observe Japanese etiquette (e.g. bowing to the elder) and use traditional samurai swords, the authority figure of Prince Escalus is transformed into the city mayor, who looks more like an American detective, wearing a suit and trench coat and holding a coffee cup. Unlike the rebel Romeo, Paris is conveyed as a glasses-wearing accountant, standing for the conventional, rules-abiding lover.

On the other hand, COM (2010) – the artist of the Japanese version [which is actually inspired from the homonymous 24-episode anime (Japanese cartoons)] – sets the story on an aeropolis, in an indefinite future, creating a fairy-tale atmosphere. The story begins with a focus on Juliet, but it shifts between her and Romeo as the narrative progresses. The book opens with an image of Juliet dressed as the Red Whirlwind, a vigilante who protects the citizens of Neo Verona against the oppressing rule of the ruthless Prince Montague, Romeo's father. Fourteen years before, when Juliet was only a two-year-old, the Montagues slaughtered her entire family, and she was raised as a boy (Odin) by the Capulet servants and loyal allies. When she turns sixteen, Juliet finds out her true identity and takes over the fight to regain her legitimate right to the throne. Romeo appears as the rebellious crown prince, dissatisfied with his father's ruling. Disappointed by her husband's ruthlessness, lady Montague has joined a convent and lives her life as an ordinary nun, whom Romeo occasionally visits.

The two warring houses are also colour-coded: Juliet wears red, standing for passion, courage and sacrifice, but also for blood and aggression (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1993b:171-174), whereas Romeo wears a blue princely outfit, suggesting wisdom and coolness, stability and loyalty (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1993a:79-82). Yet the colours are somewhat complementary, indicating that Romeo and Juliet are two parts of a whole, completing each other. Their noble sounding names – Juliet Fiammata Ars de Capulet and Romeo Candore de Montague – allow insights into the characters' personality traits (Juliet is passionate and unpredictable, while Romeo is candidly honest), as well as into the responsibilities they have not only towards their families but also towards the whole community of the floating island.

As mentioned earlier, intertextual and metatextual elements are pervasive in the Japanese *Romeo x Juliet* manga. Besides the city of Neo Verona reminding us of Prospero's magical island, a few more references are worth recording: Shakespeare himself appears as a character – Will –, a theater owner and playwright; the police of Neo Verona are called *Carabinieri* (the Italian word for 'police'), giving the story a note of real life authenticity; the Nurse is a young woman named Cordelia (reminiscent of the character in *King Lear*); Lady Montague is identified as Portia (a hint at *The Merchant of Venice*); Tybalt Capulet turns out to be Montague's illegitimate son and his murderer; Escalus is a sort of 'tree of life', supporting the entire island, while its guardian is called Ophelia (a nod to *Hamlet*). Nonetheless, the most significant deviation is Juliet herself: similar to all Shakespearean comedy heroines, she cross-dresses as Odin to protect her identity, does amateur acting in Will's theater house, and further masquerades as the Red Whirlwind.

#### 4. Reinscribing Sexuality

In the original play, Shakespeare has many of the characters use many bawdy innuendoes and witticisms. For example, Mercutio often jokes about sexual intercourse, especially when he exchanges witty insults with Romeo; Juliet's father tells Paris that death has deflowered his daughter; the Nurse tells a story about three-year-old Juliet falling and hurting her forehead when, in her husband's opinion, she would have been smarter falling backwards; Romeo and Juliet's marriage is consummated before his departure, etc.

An interesting study in terms of early modern sexuality and desire, which steps away from the medical and juridical framework, is Menan's *Wanton Words* (2004). The book explores the connection between rhetorical language and figurative sexuality, providing us with new insights into the concept and nature of desire in early modern England. Organizing her analysis on figures of speech (e.g. metalepsis, the missing link between two other tropes) in such plays as *Romeo and Juliet*, Menan (2004:78) demonstrates that it is not a tragedy of fate, but of a failed rhetoric expressed in the scene of love's figural consummation (Act III, scene 5). Menan (2004:78-82) further argues that metalepsis equates the missing sex scene in the play with Romeo and Juliet's discussion over the lark and the nightingale; for her, this discussion actually represents the consummation of the marriage but simultaneously a violation of it: no link is forged and the world of the play keeps turning as if no marriage took place.

Sexuality is, therefore, a delicate issue that cannot be easily overlooked by any adaptation or transmediation. In order to explore its treatment in these two manga versions, I have chosen four key moments in

the plot which contain such allusions: Romeo and Juliet's first meeting, their first kiss, the marriage ceremony and wedding night, and the outcome.

#### **4.1. The First Encounter**

In the British version when Romeo sees Juliet at the Capulets' ball, there are two flower vines in the background, reaching towards each other and foreshadowing the relationship between the two youngsters. By contrast, in the Japanese version, Romeo first saves the life of the Red Whirlwind from his pursuers but does not receive the gratitude he expected. He meets Juliet later the same day at the Montagues' masked ball while she, dressed as a girl, is running away (COM 2010, Act 1) in a Cinderella manner, leaving the mask behind. Wondering why the palace is so familiar to her, she runs into Romeo and loses her mask, as he holds her to prevent her from falling. In the background of the alternating sequence of micros and monos, there are crashing flower petals. In both mangas then the presence of vines, flowers or flower petals indicates sexual attraction and budding romance.

#### **4.2. The First Kiss**

In *Romeo and Juliet* (Appignanesi and Leong 2010:37), the first kiss takes place at the ball, as they are dancing, with stars surrounding them in a gentle whirlwind against a background of bubbles. The half-hug they exchange during the dance and the flush on Juliet's face suggest intense emotions and an increase in sexual tension. At the same time, the stars are a visual reference to the "star-crossed lovers" and their fate-ruled lives. On the contrary, in *Romeo x Juliet* (COM 2010), the protagonists experience their first kiss only in Act 5, soon after they have learnt each other's true

identities and Romeo has confessed his love. The panel of micros renders the kiss from three different angles, recording the intensity of the moment, while a fourth frame focuses on Juliet's response, as she is fighting her own feelings but finally gives in to love, and tightens the embrace. In both versions, Romeo's kiss takes Juliet by surprise and her mild reluctance is soon overcome. Their kiss comes to represent the power of love and a symbolic engagement.

### **4.3. The Marriage and Wedding Night**

Interestingly, each manga appropriates the setting of the marriage, relocating it in the other culture and religion. Thus, in the British manga the lovers get married in what looks to be a Buddhist temple, with the ceremony run by a Buddhist monk (Appignanesi and Leong 2010:75). Dressed in traditional Japanese clothes, with happiness exuding from their body language, Romeo and Juliet are depicted in a panel of micro frames against a background of several bunches of blossoming cherry flowers, suggesting once more their love and youth. Contrasting with these micros, their wedding night, which takes place after Romeo has killed Tybalt, is depicted in panels of macro frames that gradually turn into tear-ridden micros as Romeo's departure draws near. Unlike the original play, where we are not allowed into Juliet's boudoir, the British illustrator bends the manga conventions and presents the lovers in the intimacy of Juliet's room, with her sitting on the bed and Romeo leaning against her legs on the floor. Romeo's casual wear and Juliet's decent nightgown convey a highly private (postcoital even) scene, when the two kiss and caress at ease, love in their eyes, revelling in each other's presence. The change in the background is also noteworthy: the initial alternating stars and peonies – symbolic of

fulfilled dreams, love and honour respectively – are replaced by ink drops that actually stand for blood stains. All these, together with a very suggestive micro frame of Romeo and Juliet's hands desperately reaching for each other as they do not want to separate, foreshadow the all-too-familiar tragic ending (Appignanesi and Leong 2010:110-111).

Comparatively, in the Japanese manga, the wedding takes place in a Christian (Catholic-looking) church, with the ceremony conducted by a priest (COM 2010, Act 6). Romeo wears another princely outfit, while Juliet is clad in a white Victorian dress with a wreath of white irises on her head, reminiscent of their second meeting in a field of such flowers. As the ceremony ends, some flower petals fall from Juliet's wreath, suggesting again an increase in sexual tension but simultaneously foreshadowing a tragic ending as the sealing kiss is interrupted by a search party for the runaway lovers. The wedding night is completely expurgated from the Japanese version and replaced by the kiss that seals the couple's religious union right before Romeo fights the pursuers and Juliet leaves for more help. The panel of micros rendering the kiss (COM 2010, Act 7) centers on the lovers' determination and their decision to remain together for all eternity. Yet the clench they have on each other also bespeaks their desperation and fear of losing each other.

#### **4.4. The Outcome**

Although the British version reinforces the tragic ending, with Romeo drinking the poison and Juliet committing seppuku with Paris' blade in the Capulets' skyscraper tomb, the final frame shows Juliet on top of Romeo, eyes closed as if sleeping. The sleep atmosphere is further conveyed by the presence of floating white feathers not only in the background but

also over their bodies. The star-crossed lovers are thus forever reunited, having finally found their peace in the eternal sleep of the dead.

In a similar way, *Romeo x Juliet* (COM 2010, Final act) ends with Juliet's sacrifice to the Escalus Tree, as is the Capulet women's tradition, in order to save the island, while Romeo dies too so they can be together. Their deaths may also be read as suicides, since they choose to sacrifice themselves so that the rest of the community may survive. The final page of the story, a macro frame shows Romeo and Juliet's hands tightly joined above a field of white roses and irises and floating petals, with the lovers in the very centre of the image, heading away from the reader. The atmosphere of peace and tranquility and the happiness that exude from this picture reassure the reader that the couple will live happily ever after in a paradisiacal realm.

These illusory happy-ends, coupled with the irregularity of frame sizes and shapes, contribute to the intense emotions we experience while reading both stories. Targeted at girls in particular and in accordance with *shōjo manga*, as well as with Japanese cultural conventions, both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Romeo x Juliet* minimize such sensitive issues as sexuality and violence, focusing instead on emotions and valorizing love, friendship and loyalty over hatred, greed and treason. Both mangas make use of vegetal symbolism – such as cherry flowers, white irises, peonies or roses – to convey love, sexual attraction and tension. But they differ in the rendering of violence and aggression: whereas the British illustrator, fairly faithful to the original plot, minimizes the fighting scenes and uses big blood stains to foreshadow the tragedy, the Japanese artist – who loosely adapts Shakespeare's plot – includes a great deal of fighting scenes and

onomatopoeia of weapons clashing, but – surprisingly enough for the number of violent scenes – there is almost no rendition of blood.

As concerns the depiction of teenage behaviour in the two mangas analyzed, the conventionally rebellious adolescent behaviour in *Romeo and Juliet* contrasts with both protagonists' responsibility of leadership in *Romeo x Juliet*. In the British version, both teenagers protest against the authority of their parents and are punished by them (e.g. Juliet for refusing to marry Paris) or the highest authority figure (e.g. Romeo's banishment by Prince Escalus). By contrast, in the Japanese manga, both Romeo and Juliet fight for their love and the abolition of tyranny. They both wish for a better and happier world of sharing and understanding, which they can only achieve through self-sacrifice. Thus, the conservative British storyline renders the young couple's love against their parents' vanity and ignorance of what is best for their children or, in other words, against an unexplored root cause of the blood-feud. On the other hand, the Japanese plot draws on the thirst for power as the principal cause of the feud, while both Romeo and Juliet, neglected or abandoned by their parents grow up to be much more responsible and less selfish, aiming not only for personal, but universal, happiness.

## **5. Conclusions**

The two mangas analyzed here propose two new ways of refashioning Shakespeare's work, making it accessible to the modern young generation through a medium they can easily understand and relate to, while simultaneously showing him as (still) our contemporary. Although both *Romeo and Juliet* (Appignanesi and Leong 2010) and *Romeo x Juliet* (COM 2010) operate at the crossroads of two cultures, the Japanese version is more

observant of the manga conventions, while the British version seems to play more on sexuality. Yet even if the changes in the socio-cultural realities trigger the reader's feeling of defamiliarization with the story, and even if the conventions of the subgenres developed in the two mangas – British drama versus Japanese fairy-tale – should foretell a twist in the narrative pattern, it does not ultimately occur. Both transmediations reinforce the well-known schema – Romeo and Juliet both die in the end – but successfully create the illusion of a 'happily ever after', with the two star-crossed lovers finally united somewhere in heaven. This happy-end illusion seems in accordance with human optimism and wish for goodness to be rewarded.

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