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## CHAPTER 14

# “In fair [Europe], where we lay our scene”

## *Romeo and Juliet*, Europe and digital cultures

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This chapter explores several iterations of *Romeo and Juliet* in (European) digital cultures. Europe is placed in brackets here to capture how, in a digital context, boundaries may and may not apply, but also to complicate critical debate surrounding European Shakespeares. To what extent might we encounter a distinctly European *Romeo and Juliet* in digital cultures? Our field must think critically about the kind of European narratives, mythographies and values that are mobilised through Shakespeares in Europe. Travel and surfing are deployed as metaphors in order to track Europe’s *Romeo and Juliets*, with the resulting findings in the digital Wunderkabinett regarded as a function of both human selection and algorithmically determined search. While the focus is primarily on YouTube, what emerges is a deep sense of *Romeo and Juliet*’s convergence with popular culture, news stories and contemporary discourse about integration within Europe. In digital cultures, the chapter suggests, *Romeo and Juliet* is a metalanguage for conflict, boundaries and difference.

**Keywords:** algorithms, digital cultures, Europe, flags, integration, migration, news, popular culture, race, *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare, tags, Verona, YouTube

Plays, ballet, film, musical, rock song, cartoon, advertisement: *Romeo and Juliet*, a play that anticipated, documented, and to a certain extent scripted the concept of ‘youth culture,’ has consistently found new genres, pertinent and impertinent, in which to stage the fraught dialogue between maturity and immaturity, experience and instinct, ‘we’ and ‘you,’ ‘now’ and ‘then.’ (Garber 2009, 61)

O! she doth teach the Europe to burn bright.

(The Shakespeare Quote Generator)

Do we not in some way – and perhaps especially in a time of such widespread and violent political conflict – risk sharing a mystified attachment to this tale: to have been able to eternalise the moment, to have died young and beautiful and become memorialised by a city and a history? To be remembered beyond the grave? To escape, to exit?  
(Freccero 2011, 306)

## Introduction

To Marjorie Garber's list of the different media and forms through which Shakespeare's "star-crossed" lovers have been variously reanimated, remediated and constructed in history, we must now add digital platforms such as YouTube and Tumblr. These simultaneously offer new modes of engagement and response to *Romeo and Juliet* but also sustain contact with older as well as concurrent media forms, as digital users remix and repurpose content from film, TV and other media. Digital platforms and their cultures – that is, the habits, practices and forms that have emerged as individuals use the likes of YouTube or the (mis)quote generator site in the second epigraph – contribute to *Romeo and Juliet*'s extraordinarily alluring mythography. As we surf the Internet or travel across digital cultures in search of *Romeo and Juliet*'s multiple iterations, we might find ourselves wondering about Garber's sense of this cultural text as an ontology, and an agential one ("*Romeo and Juliet* [...] has found") at that. A more complex dynamic is at work with digital platforms, one entailing the text, the human user and the computational technology, the non-human actor if you will. Recognising the latter complicates the idea of surfing and travelling that I have introduced, since what we notice or find is not only a function of our search inputs but also algorithmic systems that return similar content and IP addresses that note the location of search. This relation between the potential of the Internet to be borderless and its local dimensions has been a feature of Shakespeares too. Martin Orkin (2007, 2) describes Shakespeare as a type of travel across temporal, spatial and geographic borders, yet also attends to the localised nature of all readings. He is especially interested in the possibilities and future knowledges that might emerge when travel takes place between "disempowered localities" and Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet* itself has long been a conduit for traffic between different locations or, to echo Garber, between "we" and "you," "now" and "then," perhaps to such an extent that the play's own location in "fair Verona" is erased. Yet tourists flock to the Casa di Giulietta, reputed to be Juliet's house to take selfies beside her statue or to video themselves cupping her breast and then post their travel-vlog to YouTube, recording their pilgrimage to this point of origin. These phenomena situate the play in Italy and Europe, in ways that reverberate with Clara Calvo and Ton Hoenselaars's (2008, 1) claim that Shakespeare's "literary craft was not just native English or British, but was

above all filtered and fashioned through a Renaissance awareness that deserves to be recognised as essentially European." This in turn prompts the question "how, if at all, is the phenomenon that we call 'Shakespeare' constitutive of a distinct sense of European self-identity?" (5). I want to pursue this question with reference to iterations of *Romeo and Juliet* in (European) digital cultures. Europe is in brackets here to convey that in a digital context, such boundaries may and may not apply, but also to complicate Calvo and Hoenselaars' reframing of Shakespeare as European rather than British, which risks substituting one type of essentialism for another. While it is productive to consider the view beyond Shakespeare's putative home in the "Anglosphere" (Bassi 2016a, 11) and to recognise Shakespeare as "not only an intra-cultural process but also an intercultural one" (González 2012, 36), equally we need to think critically about the kind of Europe or European narratives that may be activated through European Shakespeares / Shakespeares in Europe. This chapter argues that the value of *Romeo and Juliet* in digital cultures resides less in its articulation of Shakespeare's Europeanness than in the text's allure – as captured by Carla Freccero in the third epigraph – and its adaptable capaciousness to function as a metalanguage for conflict, boundaries and difference.

The focus of what follows is primarily on YouTube, which can function as a valuable archive with the potential to expand knowledge of *Romeo and Juliet*'s reach, and not just within Europe, and to challenge preconceptions about what the text and indeed Europe signify. The examples noted in surfing and searching for European Romeo and Juliets suggest the text's convergence with popular culture, news stories and contemporary debates about integration within Europe.

### Travel: "In fair Verona"

In an essay on YouTube's value as a repository of Shakespeare artefacts and user-generated content, Barbara Hodgdon (2010) employs travel as a metaphor for using the platform. Through targeted searches, she stops off at Dover beach, Fair Verona and Elsinore, noting on her journey through *Romeo and Juliet* videos the cultural dominance of Baz Luhrman's film as source text for fan videos, remixes and other genres of digital participatory cultures. Functioning as an archive of past productions, as well as a space that invites or promotes new content, YouTube reveals the global reach of a text like *Romeo and Juliet*. Or, to put this another way, videos tagged with these nouns, compounds and related keywords (these could include Verona, Luhrmann, Shakespeare, love) make the text discoverable to YouTube search and thus to the inquisitive user. Video metadata such as title descriptions and tags enable what Thomas Elsaesser also identifies as YouTube travel, producing

a chain reaction that the user can follow, as one video leads to another and another, revealing “unexpected avenues in a wonderful efflorescence of rhizomatic profusion, beckoning in all directions and sending [the user] on a most wonderful journey of discovery” (Elsaesser 2009, 177). If, as Elsaesser goes on to suggest, the logic of YouTube travel is “Don’t follow the flag, follow the tag” (180), as tags take us across borders and even continents, can we speak of a distinctly European *Romeo and Juliet* in digital cultures? The answer is in part, yes, since out of the journey from video to video or tag to tag we can make selections and produce “a story world of sorts” (181), even a narrative, that can be archived in a YouTube playlist. Yet the experience of YouTube suggests a more complex response that, as Elsaesser argues, entails a sense of euphoria as we move across YouTube’s surfeit of interconnected content, but also a sense of distraction, repetition and ennui as we chase our selected search term. There may be a pleasure in tracking a European narrative of *Romeo and Juliet*, of seeing what is there, but a frustration too, as one negotiates the unbounded archive that is YouTube. While epiphany and entropy may only capture aspects of YouTube’s affect, they usefully highlight the relation between what the individual user notices and the architecture of the platform. As such, what we experience and produce through our search may ultimately be atomised stories, metanarratives within YouTube’s enigmatic grand narrative, in ways that are suggestive of Europe as set of stories that form a narrative predicated on cohesion. This is a guiding principle for my own search of European Romeo and Juliets in digital cultures – a narrative may emerge but it is necessarily selective, subjective, and a function of the non-human actor, YouTube search.

The “Verona” in Hodgdon’s title can be the Verona beach that forms part of the *mise en scène* of Lührmann’s adaptation but in tandem with the play’s iconic characters, Verona functions as a floating signifier. The setting for the play, it localises *Romeo and Juliet* to Italy – it may even constitute “the most extraordinary Italian adaptation of Shakespeare” (Bassi 2016b, 193) – but also signifies the Italian and European roots of the story that Shakespeare adapted. To the assertion that “Shakespeare was born in Europe,” we should therefore add that Romeo and Juliet are Italian and European. Theirs is a European story that has gone global. YouTube affords us vicarious access to site-specific histories and impressions of character through travel-vlogs featuring Juliet’s house and statue. In *Romeo and Juliet | Verona, IT*, a young Brazilian visitor Marcello Dal Molin explains that Verona is, to quote from the English subtitles, “one of the most romantic cities in the world” and “the land of Romeo and Juliet” (Dal Molin 2016). Speaking direct to camera in the familiar YouTube mode of address, the vlog, Dal Molin’s is at once a personalised account of Juliet and at the same time generic in that, like other visitors and other videos, it shows Juliet’s wall (where couples leave notes or sign locks), the statue itself, the balcony and finally Juliet’s tomb. In *Italy Vlog #4 – Verona: Juliet’s Balcony & Wall!*, a related video that we travel to

via YouTube's systems of semantic tagging and its recommendations, a young couple from Northern Ireland struggle to find a space to leave their names on Juliet's wall (Belleza 2015). If, as one writer puts, "the pilgrim lovers have given way to the pilgrim tourist" (Bassi 2016a, 146), this is not to advance a negative judgement of those who visit Juliet's house but rather to foreground how the experience's affect invariably feels clichéd or hyperreal in ways that are characteristic of postmodern culture (Burnett, Streete, and Wray 2011, 2). Thus, the tradition that touching Juliet's right breast brings one true love is documented on YouTube but also parodied, as in the video *Italians cupping Juliet's shiny breast: Europe: Verona Trip* (Redondo 2015).

In documenting the tourist experience, these videos are indicative of YouTube's association with the quotidian and with a culture of sharing: as with social media more generally, YouTube can be understood as coaxing users into generating and then sharing media content (Morrison 2014, 112–131). From a Shakespeare studies perspective, these videos continue a long tradition of Shakespeare tourism that in the case of Juliet's house, dates to at least the nineteenth century (Watson 2007, 220–221). They are audiovisual indices of Shakespeare as a cultural phenomenon, one with a long history. "To enter the courtyard, and to encounter Juliet, is to negotiate multiple expressions of Shakespeare: it is to engage in a phenomenon that looks backwards and forwards and at many points in between" (Burnett, Streete, and Wray 2011, 2). For some visitors, seeing Juliet's balcony may recall film adaptations such as Franco Zeffirelli's, itself the quintessential Italian-looking *Romeo and Juliet*, perhaps now supplanted in that role by Carlo Carlei's *Romeo & Juliet* (2013), or bring to mind a theatre production which itself might be referencing the Verona balcony or a painting of it, such as Francesco Hayez's *The Last Kiss*, a reproduction of which hangs in the Casa di Giulietta (see Cavecchi 2016). In travelling to Juliet's house through YouTube travel vlogs, we partake in a dense "citational environment" (Cartelli and Rowe 2007, 29), to borrow a phrase from an interpretation of Shakespeare film, that such a figure or text represents. Several of these are neatly brought together in a video titled *The Cheek of Night* (Tagliaro 2016). Taking the form of a montage or video essay, and set to Abel Korzeniowski's score for Carlei's film, it features paintings of the lovers by artists such as Hayez (1823), Anselm Feuerbach (1864), and Frank Dicksee (1884); a painting of Claire Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio as Juliet and Romeo; several images from Zeffirelli's and Carlei's films; and also photos of Juliet's "real" balcony. As we watch the flow of paintings by an Italian, a German and an English painter respectively, we can apprehend how keyed *Romeo and Juliet* is into European visual cultures and – as the video concludes with stills of Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey (from Zeffirelli) and Hailee Steinfeld and Douglas Booth (from Carlei), only referencing Luhrmann once – to the influence of this history of illustrated Shakespeare on cinematography. Each of these iterations contributes to Romeo and Juliet's now ubiquitous,

well-documented association with youthfulness and beauty, especially in the case of the films that cast attractive young actors in the title roles to appeal to a teen demographic. However, a further effect of the video montage, especially when viewed in the context of the aforementioned videos, is to draw attention to how YouTube itself produces a chain of associations – Juliet, Romeo, Shakespeare, Verona, Italy, Europe; they become intertwined to the point that they each function synecdochically for the other. One could go further, then, to suggest that as remediated on YouTube, Romeo and Juliet's Verona implies a larger narrative about Europe as history, as cultural heritage, as the place where true love (in these examples figured as between heterosexuals and white people) can be discovered. The mythography of *Romeo and Juliet* contributes to a mythography of Europe.

The flow or chain of associations that are being tracked here should be understood as a function not merely of individual search, as in the kind of targeted migration from one Shakespeare video to the next that Hodgdon registers, but of YouTube itself or more precisely its algorithmic systems, which learn our search preferences and in turn tailor what we see on the interface. As any YouTube user will know, the platform quickly generates and ranks a set of results based on each search: there is the work of the unseen computational layer (Manovich 2001, 46). When we select a video, the system returns similar content based on video metadata such as the title and the semantic or descriptive tags that a user adds to the video when uploading it. Tags or keywords are crucial for making a video discoverable to YouTube search (Eves 2015). Among the platform's affordances is the convenient "Recommended for you" videos to the right of the home screen that present similar content based on tags and that direct us towards our interests. For example, as a consequence of my search for "Romeo and Juliet and Verona," among the suggested videos are tracks by Italian rock band In Fair Verona because YouTube selects these videos based on the common descriptive tag "Verona." If one closes off of these suggestions, a message appears "Got it. We'll tune your recommendations." As a message from the non-human interface, this is a reminder of YouTube's personalisation algorithms – as a Google company, YouTube "learns" from searches performed on other Google applications – that take on a power or even agency in shaping what we watch (Gillespie 2016). If we use the YouTube app on our personal devices, or login to YouTube's homepage, the content we see is algorithmically determined. This is of benefit to the researcher, who is directed to related content: at the time of writing, my YouTube channel is full of European Romeo and Juliets, along with recommendations based on prior search. This illustrates the agential role of digital media more generally in providing new modes of access to Shakespeare: as Dirk Delabastita (2016, 1343) notes, "thanks to the media, translated and untranslated Shakespeares are now circulating in a global space where borders, locations and citizenship count for less and less."

YouTube affords access to adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* that have not found sufficient attention in the literature on the text's myriad intermedial afterlives. From fair Verona, I can journey to Budapest and to the Hungarian rock musical from 2008, itself an adaptation of Gérard Presgurvic's musical *Roméo et Juliette: de la Haine à l'Amour* (2001) which premiered in Paris. The Hungarian production is available in full, in excerpts, as well as in Hungarian, or with English subtitles added by YouTube users (Channel of Doom 2008). Following YouTube's recommendations and tags directs us toward the official music video of "Les Rois du Monde," the hit song from the French musical (Syl G 2009). Fan tributes such as *Romeo y Julieta – Los Reyes del Mundo* also feature (Vega 2010). However, YouTube identifies location through IP addresses. As it "knows" that I am searching from Ireland, the language setting defaults to English, so in order to disrupt the Anglosphere, one has to make changes in preferences or engage in active search to travel deep into YouTube's recommendations. It is possible to change one's content location to Worldwide or else to a specific country; as YouTube explains: "This changes the videos and channels shown to you. It won't change the language of the site." While YouTube is far too amorphous to allow any definitive conclusions about its invisible borders, these are important details or conditions of use that complicate the kind of free travel that surfing YouTube conjures up. The architecture of the site and its tailoring of content to personal search and location is thus another factor in the production of narrative and in the stories of European Romeo and Juliets in digital cultures.

### Wunderkabinett

As the examples from the musical adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* suggest, YouTube provides access to iterations of the text in popular culture. It is an indice of its sometimes dizzying ubiquity as a signifier of romance and youth. YouTube travel in search of European Romeo and Juliets returns "Romeo si Julieta" by Romanian pop act Like Chocolate (Cat Music 2015). Foregrounding the perspective of Juliet, who fabricates stories of past lovers in order to make her Romeo jealous, the track and video continue a now established convention of pop music adaptations of using Shakespeare's lovers to express the gender politics of heterosexual romance. YouTube functions as a Wunderkabinett in which we can search, curate and repeatedly view the text's multiple connotations. It is an archive of Shakespeareana, an impermeable one at that, since content can be removed for reasons of copyright infringement or because a YouTuber elects to do so. But it is also an "archive of feelings" (Raun 2012, 178), registered in the thumbs up or down icon that appears below each video, as well as comments by and interactions between users. These features are indicative of the participatory culture of digital platforms as they foster greater modes of engagement



and response than those afforded by traditional broadcast media (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). As we look down through comments, we gain a sense of YouTube as a social network and, as fans of Like Chocolate, or of the icons Romeo and Juliet interact, as in the user who posts #romeoandjuliet directing users to the first view page for YouTube search, we also gain a sense of communities that are not just European, but global. This is evidenced by the video *Sacrifice (Romeo and Juliet Fan-Made Music Video)*, an early and popular example of YouTube user-generated content (Wildflowersfield 2007). Borrowing footage from Luhrmann's adaptation and adding the track "Sacrifice" by Russian pop duo t.A.T.u, this fan video is its own audiovisual production focusing on the then teenage Leonardo DiCaprio; in a sense, the location of the creator is not important to the reception. This mashup is emblematic of globalisation as the video repurposes available content from different cultural contexts and media to create its DiCaprio fandom.

That such fan communities and user-generated content exist cheek-by-jowl with YouTube's commercial imperatives and reliance on advertising is well known. In this digital Wunderkabinett, we are not just viewing cultural objects or treasures but the full range of cultural production; indeed, YouTube visualises the blurring of distinctions between high and popular culture associated with the postmodern condition. This means that in addition to finding excerpts or even full productions of *Romeo and Juliet* in or from Europe, one also finds advertisements appropriating the play's iconic balcony scene, such as *Romeo&Julia, und Klaus*, for Duplo, a German chocolate product (BatonikDuplo 2013). In this remediation of the play and indeed the historical past, Romeo, dressed in stagey Renaissance costume and standing below the balcony, finds himself replaced in Juliet's affections by the cooler Klaus, in modern dress and on a motorbike, who wins the girl with a Duplo bar. Repetition is the logic of this advert and of commercial uses of the play more generally, with the balcony scene constituting the familiar that can be cited or repeated again and again. Duplo's use of Shakespeare's play follows that of H&M, the Swedish owned global fashion chain, who in 2005 released a film advert directed by David La Chapelle (maxometer009 2007). Featuring singer Mary J Bilge, a mixed race cast, and with multiple cues to filmic adaptations, including *West Side Story* and Luhrmann, this stylish production reconfigures the story as "a millennial romance" (Burnett and Wray 2006, 3) in which racial difference is simultaneously invoked, yet also commodified. Repetition entails a politics too. The Duplo ad's all-Caucasian cast reproduces whiteness as a site of unconscious privilege, with the racially homogenous trio of Romeo, Juliet and Klaus in the quasi-historical setting of Verona creating for TV and online audiences the impression that this is what modern Germans and/or Europeans look like. As kitsch and as normative as the Duplo ad is, it nonetheless warrants inclusion in the *Romeo and Juliet* Wunderkabinett. It is as an indice of the text's ubiquity in Germany, bound up with the "unser Shakespeare"

phenomenon; it is a reiteration of Romeo and Juliet's false universalism as a white romance; and it is also a generative interpretation of the play, for it captures that story's dramatic emphasis on the impermanency of the lovers: as with the play's Rosalind, so are Romeos replaceable. Once again, YouTube affords attention to adaptations of the text that might otherwise be overlooked.

Fan texts, along with movie trailers and in some cases full content, make YouTube a film archive, albeit an ephemeral and unpredictable one.<sup>1</sup> Several European adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* are available on the platform or similar ones such as Vimeo, including ones that do not feature in Shakespeare filmographies and surveys.<sup>2</sup> Among the latter is the Serbian film *Guca* (2006), the German *Alaska.de* (2000), and a French adaptation from 2006. Perhaps a more interesting discovery of YouTube travel are silent film adaptations of the play, such as the 1911 *Romeo e Giulietta* directed by Gerolamo Lo Savio (Lananna 2015). Shot on location in Verona, the film reveals "the Italian flair for spectacle" and a "form of tragic sentimentality that will not reappear until Baz Luhrmann" (Lehmann 2007, 121). By opening two YouTube screens and placing them side-by-side on a desktop, this comparison could be pursued further. Both a medium and a historical consciousness can emerge in using YouTube.

An example of how YouTube directly fosters historical consciousness is the release by British Pathé of its archive online. Search can be performed within Pathé's YouTube channel or via Google, affording easy user access. Among the results for *Romeo and Juliet* is the 1924 silent film *Living Paintings* (British Pathé 2014a). Described in the title sequence as "a presentation novelty. Romeo and Juliet. As performed at the Regent Theatre, London," it features John Gielgud and Gwen Ffrangegon-Davies in the balcony scene, though the lack of close ups means the actors are hardly identifiable. The "novelty" in question is the *mise-en-abyme*, with the stage action framed within a picture that, as viewed on the YouTube screen, is itself framed. The Pathé channel provides a further sense of Shakespeare in history through its range of news stories. As these loop or automatically play on the channel, we can access footage of various Shakespeare commemorations. For instance, *Shakespeare's Birthday* (1938) shows the flags of the world, including that of Nazi Germany but excluding the recently annexed Austria, being unfurled in Stratford-upon-Avon (British Pathé 2014b). The voiceover, here in English RP, buoyantly states "so once again the flag symbolises the world's gratitude for the gift of Britain's poet." He goes on to note that the flag of Austria is gone, while that of Ethiopia, a country which

1. For instance, *Ifchissimi* (1981), dir. Carlo Vanzina, is no longer available because of a copyright claim. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6v6T-4mmOU>.

2. See Lehmann (2007) and also Lanier (2007), which is impressive in its tracking of the play's multiple filmic adaptations and citations.

has just come under Italian military occupation, still flies; “great art knows no political frontiers,” he adds. As YouTube loops to a related video, *Shakespeare’s 400th Anniversary (1964)* (British Pathé 2014c), it becomes apparent that tags and flags are not as easily separated as was previously suggested. YouTube, Pathé, Shakespeare, each plays a constitutive, generative role in Europe’s history. Shakespeare continues to be intertwined with Europe, a visual reminder being the EU flag that, alongside the Union Jack, flies outside the RSC’s Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, although in a post-Brexit context, one wonders for how much longer.

YouTube is by necessity an unpredictable archive of past artefacts but as with other digital platforms it has an increasingly significant role in shaping how we remember and record the past. As more traditional concepts of collective memory give way to current understandings of connective memory (Hoskins 2009, 91–108), we need to be mindful of how technologies operate as mediating entities that shape what we know of the past. YouTube’s superabundance of content is such that we might come to think that everything is somehow there, to be readily accessed at a click. Yet it needs to be supplemented with professionally curated archives or “memory organisations” such as Europeana, the EU’s digital archive (EuropeanaEU’s channel 2012). The site is a multimedia, multilingual digital repository that provides a single search platform for the materials of libraries and archives of participating EU member states so that these archives are interoperable to each other. Taking up the invitation on the homepage to “Explore 53,537,642 artworks, artefacts, books, videos and sounds from across Europe,” a search for “Romeo and Juliet” returns 650 results. This is an extraordinary resource for those interested in illustrated Shakespeare as well as theatre and book history – there is a 1787 engraving of the balcony scene by Dutch artist Thomas Stothard and, from the nineteenth century, another iconic visual, this time of Romeo and Juliet’s deathbed, by German artist Peter Von Cornelius. In a blog post titled “Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?,” which uses Shakespeare to promote the site, there are production images from Hungarian Royal Opera House 1954 ballet (Europeanablog). These images can be easily saved on a computer or curated on user-generated image archives like Pinterest (which provides a browser button that allows a user to pin images from across the web) or on microblogging sites such as Storify and Tumblr. In fact, in keeping with its rhetoric about providing access to Europe’s shared heritage, the Europeana site actively invites users to remix objects in the collection through the provision of open-access software applications (Europeanalabs). Digital platforms can be used as experiential learning tools, with students encouraged to use the site to research Romeo and Juliet images or tasked with creating their own photosets of the kind found on Tumblr. An excellent example of the latter is the blogger do-you-hear-the-people’s “modern Shakespeare” series (Do-You-Hear-The-People 2015), which are not merely character studies through images but rather constitute

their own form of story as the viewer is invited to construct a narrative from the tile layout. The digital thus provides for a new mode of visual essays and adaptations of the Shakespeare text.

### News: “Is thy news good, or bad? Answer to that”

The word “news” is mentioned 15 times in the play, in contexts ranging from hope as Juliet frustratingly elicits information from the Nurse, to anxiety as a banished Romeo asks of news from Verona, to tragedy as Balthasar reports “the ill news” of Juliet’s death (Open Source Shakespeare). That the play’s lovers should provide analogies for modern news and theatres of war is therefore unsurprising. The play’s central dynamic of the lovers’ transgression of difference based on an “ancient grudge” between the two houses has proved adaptable to a range of contexts. On 23 May 1993, Kurt Schork, a Reuters journalist covering the Bosnian war, reported on the tragic deaths of Boško Brkić and Admira Ismić (Schork 1993). Fatally shot on Vrbana bridge, Sarajevo, as they tried to flee the city, the young couple became symbols for victims of the internecine conflict. They became known as “Sarajevo’s Romeo and Juliet,” with their story later memorialised in a documentary for PBS’s *Frontline* (D4M1R2 2012). This is available on YouTube, along with news reports on the 20th anniversary of their death. As news is increasingly digital, which is to say that stories can be easily searched and located, it becomes apparent how Romeo and Juliet continue to serve as analogies for topical events, such as the war in Syria and the refugee crisis that it has precipitated.<sup>3</sup> In an “Exclusive” story, *The Daily Mail*, a UK tabloid newspaper, reports about a “Teenage ‘Romeo and Juliet’ split by Pope’s refugee rescue” (Hunter 2016). The article tells the story of Abdul-Majid, a Syrian teenager displaced from his home as a consequence of war, who fell in love with a Spanish aid volunteer at a refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos, before receiving refugee status under a scheme sponsored by Pope Francis. Perhaps a function of the characters’ ubiquity or of the aesthetics of modern news, this story nonetheless reveals a turn to Shakespeare in times of crisis.

As Shakespeare is performed in refugee camps both within Europe itself and beyond, we encounter the complex politics around “Shakespeare in Europe.” The digital functions as an important, though incomplete, archive of these stories and events: one can perform a Google search to locate news reports or discover if there are videos posted on YouTube. One such example is The Globe’s performance of *Hamlet* at the Good Chance Theatre’s stage at a refugee camp in Calais, dubbed

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3. For details of the numbers involved and the humanitarian crisis, see <http://syrianrefugees.eu/>.

“The Jungle,” as part of the Globe’s roving production of *Hamlet* for Shakespeare 400 (Brown 2016). From a search on YouTube, one discovers that a Swiss theatre company performed *Romeo and Juliet* at Camp Domiz, a Syrian refugee camp in Iraq (NRT English 2015). In the news report, a teacher explains: “we organised this event in order to make them forget about their daily suffering.” Shakespeare as respite from material suffering emerges in the Globe’s performance at Calais too. *The Guardian* report quotes a refugee, who did not wish to be named: “it is good to have something to cheer you up. This changes the mood, it brings us together” (Brown 2016). This is in tandem with the objectives of Good Chance, which has played at several other camps, and is keen to offer some relief from the material suffering but also change media perceptions of the camps’ denizens who risk becoming dehumanised (Good Chance 2016). However, while the Globe’s performance is well intentioned and places a spotlight on this contemporary humanitarian crisis, there is nonetheless something disquieting about doing the play, especially in the context of the quatercentenary celebrations offered as an expression of English culture, and more generally a synecdoche for Western tradition and culture, before an audience comprising people whose fates reside largely outside of their own control, in the hands of EU heads of state. What values are being activated through The Globe’s activities here?

A further detail from *The Guardian*’s report may provide one answer: “One of the young men watching was a nurse forced to be a soldier in Eritrea, who, smiling, gave his name as Hector. ‘I’ve read the play in a book but never seen it [...] It is good to see theatre, good to see the English tradition ... It is good to enjoy something’” (Brown 2016). Enjoyment, cultural appreciation but also an implied valorisation of English culture all find expression here and, uttered in this context, they can be understood to entail a hierarchy and privilege. As such, does Shakespeare *in* Europe express humanist values and modes of cultural exchange that one would like to associate as the bedrock of Europe, or does Shakespeare become another point of distinction between those who are already European and those who are not – or not yet – designated as European? Several responses are needed here. Firstly, we can suggest that these implications or effects are not mutually exclusive. Secondly, deeper work is needed on the reception context: in the video reports and excerpts from both the Globe’s *Hamlet* in “the Jungle” and *Romeo and Juliet* in Camp Domiz, we only get an impression of the performances and of the production-reception dynamic that is so integral to the experience of theatre (Bennett 1997). Yet even a cursory travel across these select examples reveals the extent to which the digital realises a web of connections, so that Shakespeare is imbricated in contemporary European and global crises: to the right of the YouTube watch screen for the video featuring the Swiss theatre production is related video content on the refugee crisis, but also general news items about Europe and Switzerland.

A third response is the discourse about Europe itself, in particular the contradictions around race in public discourse as examined in the work of Alana Lentin. Expanding on Stuart Hall's attention to a discourse structured upon distinctions between those "who are *in* but not of Europe," that is those who are afforded rights, albeit in a prescribed way, Lentin argues that Europe is predicated on a denial of race as a facet of its modern, that is to say post-war, history (Lentin 2008, 499). The aforementioned Bosnian conflict is a case in point, a crisis imagined as happening near but not in Europe itself. Race has been simultaneously exported or erased and also construed as an import, something that comes into Europe as a disruptive presence from elsewhere. And thus, as Lentin explains, the promise of integration places a burden on those designated as outsiders: "The implication of integration is that outsiders, condemned to be so regardless of citizenship, must integrate into and be integrated by Europe in order for its societies to become socially cohesive. There is no need for Europe to integrate into its outsiders" (ibid.). An implication of this argument is that by acknowledging race as a formative to Europeanness, as something that has always been present *within* Europe, we might foster an empathetic sense in European public discourse of what it means to be marked out as Other, to wear a badge of race, that might, in turn, go toward transforming the bases on which cohesion and integration take place.

Through the contemporary networked mediascape, we are confronted with the different, often challenging, ways that Shakespeare coincides with Europe and vice versa. Shakespeare has frequently functioned as a metalanguage for race, although as Ayanna Thompson (2011, 6) has argued, we must also recognise the possibility that Shakespeare may prove uncondusive to a progressive negotiation of contemporary race relations. Racial difference and the politics of integration are of course a feature of several film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*, from Roberta Torre's *Sud Side Story* (2000), which transposes the action to modern Palermo where "ethnic difference and racism form the barriers between the lovers" (Minutella 2013, 203), to Adil El Arbi and Bilall Fallah's *Black* (2015), where the lovers are from rival Afro-Belgian gangs in contemporary Brussels. The Romeo and Juliet story is also used to explore the thin line between being "in" but not "of" Europe in Myyki Blanco's music video for *High School Never Ends*, which is available on YouTube (TheFader 2016). Set in rural Germany, the video features Blanco, an American hip-hop artist who identifies as transgender, in a relationship with a member of a street gang. Directed by Mark Lambert, with cinematography by Martin Ruhe, the video is styled as a short film. It cues its audience to the Shakespearean intertext by quoting from the play's prologue – "Two households, both alike in dignity [...], From ancient grudge break to new mutiny" – in its opening titles. In this queer adaptation, Romeo and Juliet are less signifiers of *amor vincit omnia* than of violence and hate crimes as recurrent, relentless realities. Intercut with images of the

adult Romeo and Juliet figures are scenes of their teen counterparts or predecessors, suggesting a lost innocence but also the destructive repetition of phobic attitudes to successive generations of those deemed queer or deviant based on race or sexuality. Both Blanco and Lambert have drawn analogies between their production and the contemporary refugee crisis in Europe: “It never once overtly comments on orientation or race, but only ideas of ‘us’ and ‘them,’” explains Lambert (McDermott 2016). Blanco adds: “I had once thought Europe was my safe haven from American white supremacy, and how wrong I became” (ibid.). From the invocation of place – of America, of Europe – we move to the suggestion of imaginative spaces and alternate stories to the binary logic of us and them.

The film adapts the play’s own conjuring of Romeo and Juliet as existing beyond the space and time of their family’s grudge, bending it to the contemporary without reducing either text or context. Blanco and Lambert might be said to identify the play’s legacy or its affect not as tragedy but love, in terms provided by Carlos Antônio Leite Brandão (2016, 1329) when he writes that “the play makes us rediscover a kind of love that is free, a way to construct our humanity and our fate, which we are responsible for in a world dominated by business and by pragmatic, banal, and utilitarian relationships. Such love [...] is really what must also be performed in our twenty-first century Veronas.” Working by implication and the transfer of meanings, *High School Never Ends* suggests one kind of contemporary Verona based on violence, intolerance and hatred of the racialised Other, while it also gestures toward a space of possibility for Europe, a symbolic “Verona” in which responsibility to the Other is recognised. *Romeo and Juliet* emerges in this iteration as “European,” not in some essentialist sense of primary origin but rather because it is a text that can speak to the vicissitudes of contemporary European politics.

In travelling through YouTube and digital cultures, politicised adaptations like *High School Never Ends* or iterations turned to a specific location or territory may appear to get lost amidst the cultural dominants of *Romeo and Juliet* iterations, Luhrmann and Zeffirelli. This is a function of the repetition of the culture industry as well as the migrations of these films to digital platforms, where they survive as clips, trailers, fan remixes or other mutations, and thus remain current in our attention economy. What we notice is cultural – it is about what we regard Shakespeare as encompassing – and it is political too, because Shakespeare comes to mean different things when viewed from empowered and “disempowered localities,” to recall Orkin’s terms. This particular YouTube travel started in Verona (but really in Dublin, at a computer), stopping off at Germany, France, Hungary, Britain, encountering different uses of Shakespeare along the way. What also comes to attention are the producers and audiences of these productions, the people that are constituents of Shakespeare as a European and also global phenomenon. Some of these are European citizens, while others, displaced by war and in the midst of the

largest humanitarian crisis since World War II, look to an uncertain future within Europe's borders. The move in and out of the local and global is indicative of *Romeo and Juliet* and its status as a floating signifier – the text has long been accommodated to a variety of meanings, uses and contexts that take us beyond Verona and even Europe's borders. This is part of its allure. To return to Verona, as in the travel vlogs with which this chapter began, is merely to return to one signification of the story of which there are a multitude, from real-life Romeo and Juliets of European news stories to the appropriation of the lovers for global consumerism. In recognising such plurality and also its contradictions, I suggest that the interpretative emphasis be placed less on the story's roots in European culture, although there is value in recognising such a shared heritage, than on its rhizomatic possibilities, on the new stories that may emerge through Romeo and Juliet as these protean icons continue to take multiple lines of flight. Indeed, in the plurality of Romeo and Juliets to be found on YouTube, and in the capacity of such digital settings to disrupt borders, to move from flags to tags, one might locate an appropriate figure for Europe itself.

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