

# The Representation of Traditionally Marginalized Communities in Shakespeare Adaptation to a New Cultural and Historical Context: taking *Ophelia* (1962) and *Yulia and Juliet* (2018) as examples.

Shuyan Li

University of Edinburgh, Scotland EH8 9LH, UK

**Abstract:** By selecting *Ophelia* (Claude Chabrol, 1962) and *Yulia and Juliet* (Zara Dwinger, 2018), this thesis tries to discuss the representation of traditional marginalized communities in Shakespeare adaptations, based on the specific analysis to the original. Two different communities are involved in these two films. However, they all continue the spirit of humanitarianism which is paramount in Shakespeare's work.

**Keywords:** Global Shakespeare, Shakespeare adaptation, marginalized communities.

*Ophelia* (Claude Chabrol, 1962) and *Yulia and Juliet* (Zara Dwinger, 2018) show a focus on marginalized communities in varying degrees. The portrayal of the proletariat appears in *Ophelia*, but not as the core theme of the film, but merely as a narrative backdrop, where the story is based on the historical conditions of conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. In contrast, *Yulia and Juliet* makes marginalized groups the protagonists of the film, which means their marginalization is the major ingredient of the story. Shakespeare's works, which focus on the lives and emotions of ordinary people, are essentially profound examinations of universal human nature. Regardless of the changing times, there are similarities in human nature, which is why *Ophelia* and *Yulia and Juliet* find an entry point for adaptation in *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, even though they both are not deliberately discussing marginalized communities of their own. The key terms that emerge from the questions are "marginalized communities" and "new cultural and historical contexts". So, this essay begins by explaining the definition of "marginalized communities". Then, through discussing their respective historical and cultural contexts and the content of the original plays, it will explore how they present marginalized communities through mise-en-scène analysis, thus discussing in depth why Shakespeare's works have continued to fulfill the task of adapting to new times over the years.

Marginalized communities are those that are ignored by mainstream society. Under different social conditions, different communities will be marginalized. In feudal societies, the marginalized group is the Commoners. In capitalist societies, the marginalized community is the proletariat. In heteronormative hegemonic societies, sexual minority groups are marginalized, and in patriarchal societies, women are easy to be suppressed by men. When a film seeks to show a marginalized community, it means that there is usually a dominant community in contrast to it. In *Ophelia*, the marginalized community shown is the proletariat, as opposed to the bourgeoisie. The short film *Yulia and Juliet*, on the other hand, focuses on the juvenile delinquents, as opposed to the adults communities. In the following I will explore how each of these works represents marginalized communities with inquiring original scripts, and briefly analyze why both have chosen to adapt Shakespeare's work.

## ***Ophelia*: Resistant Proletariat**

The proletariat, as a marginalized community, has always been in deep conflict with the bourgeoisie. Although the most important theme of *Ophelia* is the perception of identity and justice, there is still a presence of the proletariat in the film. Many works of art reflect the life of the proletariat by showing this conflict. In the following section, by looking at the historical context, the political reasons for the director's concern with the proletariat will be first discussed. And then this part will analyze how the director uses *Hamlet* to represent collision and provide a more particular perspective to the proletariat by exploring the narrative details in the film and combining them with

the original script.

Firstly, after the Second World War, social tensions in Europe were prominent. The French New Wave was then birthed and represented “a radical break” (Vincendeau, 2009, p1), which was not only a revolution in filmmaking techniques, but also a change and rebellion of ideology. Many directors, such as Jean Godard, expressed their expectations towards communism. As “a representative figure for this innovative movement in French cinema” (Austin, 1999, p.12), Chabrol inevitably were influenced by radical political thoughts. *The Communist Manifesto* published in 1868 mentioned that:

The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones (Marx, 1868, p1).

It means the proletariat was born out of bourgeois oppression. However, a century later in Europe, it is still a marginalized group. On such a basis, Chabrol draws on the cinema to express his political attitude – to deny the dominant ideology, to show the life of the proletariat and to satirize the bourgeoisie. According to Karen Newman:

Chabrol repeats other elements of the text randomly, from meal scenes that satirize French bourgeois manners and parody the often remarked feeding imagery in Shakespeare’s text, to a substitution of class satire and capitalist/labor disputes for the political dimension of Shakespeare’s play.” (2009, p.78)

Newman argues that *Ophelia* shows the dichotomy between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. And this kind dichotomy is similarly presented in *Hamlet* - that is, the unequal relationship between the nobility and the commoners. Claudius and his mother, as well as Hamlet himself, represent the upper aristocracy; Polonius and Ophelia, although also aristocrats, yet cannot have the same status as the royal family, while the other characters such as Horatio, the soldiers and the gravedigger are commoners. In the film, uncle Andrien Lesurf (Calude Cerval) and mother Claudia Lesurf (Alida Valli) and Yvan (Andre Jocelyn) himself represent the bourgeoisie, while Lucie (Juliette Mayniel) and her father Andre Lagrange (Robert Burnier), the servant Paul, Sparkos (Jean-Louis Maury), the waitress, the gravedigger and most of other characters who appear belong to the working class employed by the capitalists.

On the basis, *Ophelia* and *Hamlet* are full of details that express a concern for the lives of marginalized communities, as well as the confrontation between different classes. Firstly, there is a great material difference between two classes. For example, in the film, workers employed by the uncle live together in a huge factory-like house, which is much shabbier than the luxury place where the uncle lives. What is more, the lavishness of the capitalist life is on display when Andrien hosts a banquet to celebrate Yvan’s success in making his own film. The banquets of the nobility are also mentioned in Act 1 Scene 3 of *Hamlet*:

Hamlet: [...]

This heavy-headed revel east and west

Makes us traduced and taxed of other nations

[...]

Hamlet is displeased with the extravagant habits of high society, but Yvan is more of an onlooker. When Yvan is having dinner with Andrien and Claudia, he deliberately stirs up conflict between his uncle and his servant Paul at the table, announcing that Andrien does not treat the servant well, so Paul has spat in his food.

Additionally, different material conditions reflect different social status. when he returns home, Yvan asks the gatekeeper to open the door for him, but this new gatekeeper, who does not know him, refuses to let him in, so there is an argument between them:

Gatekeeper: You’ve got to know the password. If you don’t, you can’t come in.

Yvan: I refuse, imbecile. And I will throw you out of here.

Gatekeeper: You will throw me out? That is good. You didn't hire me. How can you throw me out?

And then Sparkos appears, explaining his identity:

Sparkos: Excuse me, Mr. Yvan. He is new. He's replacing Maximilian who broke his leg. Mr. Lesurf has given us strict orders, and this kid didn't know.

Yvan: He is stupid.

Sparkos: He is not stupid, but he just got out of the army. For him, discipline is a religion. Orders are orders.

These dialogues show the unequal employment relationship between worker and capitalist: the capitalist pays the wages and the worker is expected to comply with all the capitalist's tasks. In the time of *Hamlet*, the relationship between noble and commoner was essentially one of master and servant. For example, Horatio refers to himself as "your poor servant ever" in front of Hamlet.

According to the materialist conception of history, differences in material conditions and social status will lead to other forms of difference, which become greater and result in conflict. The conflicts between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in the film are manifested in both actions and values. Sparkos, for example, talks about the revolt of the workers once:

Saprkos: We must really be our toes now. The strike probably won't be end soon. Mr. Lesurf fears agitators. He has received death threats.

Here the social context of the story is hinted at: workers are on strike and resort to various means to defend their rights. Additionally, at the end of the film, Andrien hears Paul say to another servant before he commits suicide:

Paul: We won't be servants much longer. Soon we will be the masters.

This is the final blow for Andrien, who starts doubting his own existence and feeling abandoned by everyone, including people he loves, Claudia and Yvan (who in fact is his natural son). Furthermore, the proletariat's general distrust of the bourgeoisie reveals the clash in values. For example, when Lucie's father, Andre Lagrange, comes to Andrien asking him to stop Yvan from continuing his relationship with his daughter, it is clear from the expressions on Andrien's and Claudia's faces that they resent his vulgar behavior. And Andre's prejudice against Yvan reflects their hostility towards the bourgeoisie: they see them as irresponsible in their approach to love and believe that would defile his daughter's virginity. Even though he has worked for the Lesurf's for fifteen years, he has no affinity with the capitalists. In *Hamlet*, Leartes discourages Ophelia and Hamlet from continuing their relationship:

Leartes: [...]

His greatness weighed, his will is not his own.

He may not, as unvalued persons do,

Carve for himself, for on his choice circumscribed

[...]

Leartes believes Hamlet is unable to provide true love for his status as the prince of Denmark. Inequality of status will fuel mistrust and incomprehension.

However, when facing the clash, both Yvan and Hamlet, to varying degrees, attempt to intimate the marginalized class groups. For instance, Yvan finds his friend Francois, the waitress Ginette and another guy for helping make his film. He thought Francois is the only one he could trust. And in Act 1 Scene 2 of *Hamlet*, Hamlet objects when Horatio calls himself a "poor servant" and considers himself to be "good friends" of Horatio. It can be concluded that instead of siding with mainstream society, they prefer trusting people in marginalized community.

## ***Yulia and Juliet: Tragic love and Confinement***

*Yulia and Juliet* is adapted from *Romeo and Juliet*, telling a story between two young girls who falling in love with each other in a Juvenile delinquent center in Netherlands. It uses marginalized communities as the main narrative object, focusing on the of two girls in the juvenile prison. So, director attempts to show two marginalized communities: delinquent minors, and the LGBT+ groups, which means Yulia and Juliet both have dual marginalized identities.

As juvenile delinquents, they are marginalized by the family and society. The family abandon them, and juvenile prison uses discipline and punishment to remold their behaviors. Firstly, the film places particular emphasis on the conflict between Yulia and her mother:

Mother: She no longer is my daughter...I have given her everything I had. Love and attention. But she turned her back on it all. On everything I gave her. I am ashamed of her.

This is not just an ordinary family conflict. The mother uses very serious words to break off the relationship between them. The camera first focuses on Yulia's face and then on the mother's face, neither of them appearing on screen at the same time. At last, before the mother saying "I am ashamed of her", the director uses a medium shot to bring them both on screen, but the audience can see that they are far apart and barely make eye contact. More importantly, Yulia does not look surprised or angry at her mother's words, but merely looks at her with a slightly sad expression. These details imply the estrangement of their relationship. At the same time, the absence of a father throughout the film suggests that Yulia lives in a single-parent household and that her mother, as the only family member left, has deprived her of her family identity as a daughter, implying that Yulia has been abandoned not only by society but also by her family. So, all she has is her love for Juliet. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the conflict is also within the family: the Capulet's force Juliet to marry Paris, but she refuses. So, her father becomes angry and insults her with vicious words, such as "green-sickness carrion", "baggage" and "tallow face". The Capulet cannot accept Juliet's rebellion, just as the mother in the film cannot accept Yulia's. Therefore, for Yulia, Juliet is the only comfort she has, and it is understandable Yulia uses violent actions to stop Juliet from leaving her. Even though she knows it may be pointless, she still wants to make a last effort. So, desperation and pain turn into physical violence.

In the second place, the education in the juvenile delinquent center is strict, and the adults try to use punishment and discipline to correct the wrongdoers, instead of education. For instance, Yulia is put in confinement because of her violence (confinement itself is a violent method). In an interview with a website named *Short of the week*, director Zara said:

I was interested in the idea of two girls forming this very special relationship in a confined space, and what would happen if one of them got out. What would you do? Not only is this inspired by the feeling of being stuck as a teenager, and finding solace in the tight bonds you form as a teenager. This idea of tragic love also reminded us of the most famous love story ever written: Romeo and Juliet, two actually pretty extreme teenagers if you think about it.

The most important word in this quotation are "teenagers" and "confined space". Teenagers are in a transitional period of growth and inevitably will fall into the confusion of adolescence, but society often ignores them, imagining that they can be transformed from children to mature adults overnight, with no appropriate guidance for the excesses resulting from this confusion (such as violence and other criminal behaviors). Thus, the absence of adults and ignorance of the mainstream society result in the appearance and formation of marginalized community, and these two girls draw strength from each other in their isolation.

On this basis, this film shows how this lust festers in the juvenile prison. It seems so natural for them to have lustful feelings for the same sex in a special confined space with only girls. And the specificity of this space makes their feelings even more forbidden. If the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet stems from the conflict between their families, the tragedy of Yulia and Juliet is from how they are marginalized. What both works have in common is that lovers are willing to pay any price for love – the former give their lives, the latter

give their freedom. The film starts in a very noisy corridor, with a medium shot following the steps of a blonde girl (Juliet). The audience can hear a girl with dreadlocks in the background making vulgar remarks. After Juliet smiles, stops and locks eyes with a pink-haired girl (Yulia), the scene freezes and the title of the film appears in the middle. The background music playing is also relatively breezy and Yulia even makes a face at Juliet in front of the camera. At this point, it is difficult for audience to figure out the relationship between them. Soon the music and the noise of the crowds come to a halt and these two girls start kissing passionately, leading to an accurate conclusion that they both have a crush on each other. They live in separate rooms, communicating only through an air duct every night. Although the walls are painted pink, this does not alleviate the oppressiveness of this confined space. One day, in this pink room, Juliet tells Yulia that she can go home. In shock, Yulia asks her to stay. Tension begins to spread, but unexpectedly, the two begin to kiss in a subtle state of anxiety. The atmosphere is made more ambiguous by the pink room without lights on. The director uses close-ups to show how they kiss and how they touch each other, while alternating their faces with pros and cons of playing shots. With the dim lighting and ambiguous music, the director deliberately creates an illusion in which the love and desire of them are freely released. At this moment, the audience temporarily forgets the confined space they are in and the future about to come.

And in Act 3, Scene 5 of *Romeo and Juliet*, there is also a brief romance before the coming separation:

Juliet: Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day.

It was the nightingale, and not the lark,

That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear.

Nightly she sings on yond pom'granate tree.

Believe me, love: it was the nightingale.

romeo: It was the lark, the herald of the morn,

No nightingale. Look, love, what envious streaks

Do lace the serving clouds in yonder East.

Night's candle are burnt out, and jocund day

Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.

I must be gone and live, or stay and die.

They meet at the bedroom, hearing the singing of birds, and the darkness is about to pass. But all that they must face in such a romantic setting is a cruel separation. Even if Yulia and Juliet are in prison, and even if *Romeo and Juliet's* love is opposed by both families, it is love that connects them. Love transcends family and blood, and love transcends the limitation of gender and space. Juliet's bedroom can equal the pink room in the short film. Romeo leaves through the window while Juliet stands on the balcony. Her home is the place where she is imprisoned, while in the short film Yulia is forced to stay in juvenile delinquent center. However, what is different is that in the film, the delinquent center is both the place where they are imprisoned and the place where they fall in love. *Romeo and Juliet* leave their home to elope for love, while Juliet in the film chooses to return to this cramped and depressing space for love. The protagonists in both stories make different sacrifices in pursuit of love.

Chabrol's film *Ophelia* represents the proletarian community, and *Yulia and Juliet* depicts the juvenile delinquent community and the LGBT+ community, which are both marginalized communities easily being ignored by mainstream society. Directors both chose to adapt Shakespeare's work for the potential it contains to portray marginalized communities. Unlike most previous dramas, Shakespeare's plays are more sophisticated in their presentation of the lives of ordinary people. The ancient Greek tragedies were heroic epics. The ancient Roman plays, while gradually taking on a plebeian dimension, had flat characters and lacked dramatic tension. And then the medieval drama, under

the influence of the church, had a strong moralistic tone. However, during the Renaissance, when humanism was prevalent, art gradually shifted from a focus on religious theology to a focus on human beings. Shakespeare's plays are a prime example of humanism, concerned with the capriciousness and contradictions of human nature: evil and good, and the chaos in between. There are also many groundbreaking elements in his work, such as descriptions of men dressed as women or a certain concern for female issues, which give his work a more advanced gender consciousness. It can be argued that the depth and breadth of Shakespeare's work is determined by his profound empathy for people, making them unailing in history.

Overall, the two works show marginalized communities in different ways: *Ophelia* uses the marginalized as the backdrop for the narrative, showing the living conditions of proletariat and their resistance in the face of class disparity. *Yulia and Juliet* uses the marginalized as the main narrative object, describing how two girls fall in love in a juvenile prison and how they are willing to do whatever it takes for love. It is worth noting that this is a time when heroes are no longer needed, and creators are more willing to create stories of ordinary people than grand narrative themes. So, marginalized communities are gradually emerging into the public eye. In every age and every society, there are marginal men people who are easily ignored by the mainstream society. Thus, a concern for them is a concern for oneself, which is in line with the humanitarian values revealed in Shakespeare's works. In the future, creators can use the great influence of Shakespeare's works to tell more stories about marginalized communities.

## Bibliography

- [1]Austin, G. (1999). *Claude Chabrol*. New York: Manchester University Press.
- [2]Newman, K. (2009). Ghostwriting: Hamlet and Claude Chabrol's Ophélie. *Essaying Shakespeare* (pp.77–84). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- [3]Marx, & Engels, F. (2018). *The Communist Manifesto*. In F. Engels (Ed.). Minneapolis: First Avenue Editions, a division of Lerner Publishing Group.
- [4]Serafimova, S. (2021, Jan. 5). Yulia and Juliet. *Short Of the Week*. Retrieved April 15, 2022, from <https://www.shortoftheweek.com/2021/01/05/yulia-and-juliet/>
- [5]Shakespeare, W. (2019). *Hamlet (Second Edition) (Norton Critical Editions)*. United States: W. W. Norton & Company.
- [6]Shakespeare, W. (2016). *Romeo and Juliet (First Edition) (Norton Critical Editions)*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- [7]Suchland, J. (2011). Is Postsocialism Transnational? *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 36(4), 837–862.
- [8]Vincendeau, G. (2009). Introduction: Fifty Years of the French New Wave: From Hysteria to Nostalgia. In P. Graham (Eds). *The French New Wave* (pp. 1-30). London: BFI.

## Filmography

- Ophélie* (1962) dir. Claude Chabrol, French.
- Yulia and Juliet* (2018) dir. Zara Dwinger, Netherlands.