The evolution of women’s love lives: a timeline

By Carol Dyhouse

Reaching from the middle of the twentieth century, when little girls dreamed of Prince Charming and Disney’s “Cinderella” graced movie screens, Carol Dyhouse charts the transformation of women’s love lives against radical social changes such as the passage of the Equal Pay Act, the acceleration of technological advancement, and improved access to contraception, bringing us up to the 2013 release of “Frozen.”
Five themes in Asian Shakespeare adaptations

Since the nineteenth century, stage and film directors have mounted hundreds of adaptations of Shakespeare drawn on East Asian motifs, and by the late twentieth century, Shakespeare had become one of the most frequently performed playwrights in East Asia. There are five striking themes surrounding cultural, racial, and gender dynamics. Gender roles in the play take on new meanings in translation, and familiar and unfamiliar accents expanded the characters' racial identities.

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1. What's in a name? Everything!

Word choices in East Asian films and productions reveal, or conceal, how much power a character might have over others. In Akira Kurosawa's 1957 film *Throne of Blood*, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth address each other with formal and informal gendered pronouns that betray their unease and desire for control.

What stands out in the film is how and when some characters choose informal language. When conversing with each other, Washizu (Macbeth) and Miki (Banquo) refer to each other with first names, deepen their voice, and use informal language and the informal, masculine "I" (ore).

Washizu attempts to create a similarly intimate bond with Lady Asaji (Lady Macbeth) in private, but she rejects his attempt and maintains verbal and physical distance. It is notable that when Washizu addresses Asaji, he does not use any honorific; he does not address her as *tsuma* (wife) or *okusan* (lady of the house). Meanwhile, Asaji uses the most formal, singular first-person pronoun *watakushi*, rather than the informal, feminine *atashi*, which would be what a private conversation between a husband and a wife normally entails. Asaji's combination of the formal *watakushi* and usually more casual *anata*—the latter here spoken in a register that conveys condescension and rejects intimacy—creates another layer of the uncanny beyond the atonal music.
2. Shakespeare to the rescue? Not always

While the canonical status of Shakespeare's oeuvre has led to admiration and deference, there have been many witty parodies of the tragedies. Some adaptations are built on the assumption that performing Shakespeare can improve one's moral character, but other works mock the conviction that Shakespeare has any recuperative function in the society, such as Chee Kong Cheah's Singaporean film *Chicken Rice War* (2000).

Built around the conceit of a college production of *Romeo and Juliet*, the film trivializes the feud in *Romeo and Juliet* by reducing the generations-old dispute, to the rivalry between the Wong and Chan families, who own competing chicken rice stalls. The film's opening and closing scenes, narrated by a news anchor, simultaneously parody Shakespeare's prologue, epilogue, and Baz Luhrmann's film *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*. Performing Shakespeare's play fails, in the end, to resolve the hostility between the two families—both alike in dignity.

3. Transgender performance

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Within this context of the democratization of the country, several South Korean adaptations of *Hamlet* recast Ophelia as a shaman who serves as a medium to console the dead and guide the living. Because female shamans exist outside the Confucian social structure, they have greater agency. Inspired by political and academic feminism, these works rethought the position of Korean women in society. Although Ophelia has often been appropriated as a feminist symbol, she is also a site of contestations over gender identities and roles.
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The 2005 South Korean feature film *The King and the Clown*, directed by Lee Joon-ik, echoes several themes and characters of Shakespeare’s plays, including the revenge plot in *Hamlet*, the device of a bawdy play-within-a-play in *Taming of the Shrew*, and the love triangle in *Twelfth Night*. The film depicts the erotic entanglements among a king and two acrobat street performers: the macho Jang-saeng, who plays male roles, and the trans feminine Gong-git who shares several personality traits with Hamlet’s love interest, Ophelia: an inability to express oneself, and a life largely determined by men. Gong-git is neither in flamboyant drag nor struggling with gender transition. They are accepted by other characters as a feminine person. The transgender Ophelia-character draws on the local culture of flower boys, typically “effeminate” singers or actors whose gender is fluidly androgynous.
4. Sounding racial differences

Race and ethnicity are not only visible but also audible in the multilingual film. The aforementioned *Chicken Rice War* uses multilingualism as both a dramatic device and a political metaphor. The elder generation converse in Cantonese whilst the younger generation speak mostly Singlish, or Singaporean English. Fenson and Audrey, in a mix of English and Cantonese, perform the “balcony” scene, in which Romeo and Juliet meet after the masked ball. Meanwhile, their offstage parents become more and more impatient with their public display of affection, not understanding the boundary between play making and playgoing. The parents are emotionally detached from and intellectually excluded by the younger generation’s Anglophone education, symbolized by their (unsuccessful) enactment of Shakespeare.

Singapore’s propaganda emphasizes commercial cosmopolitanism and transnational histories of immigration in the service of economic growth. *Chicken Rice War* critiques the idea that “sounding white”—speaking standard English—conveys more authority.
5. Deep connections among different cultures

There are deep connections among Asian and Anglophone performance cultures. For example, the narrative structure of Akira Kurosawa's films has provided inspiration for Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, and George Lucas.

Kurosawa tends to begin his films in medias res and offers vignettes of epic history. Similarly, George Lucas begins Star Wars with Princess Leia battling the troops of Darth Vader, plunging audiences into action already unfolding before the start of the film. Lucas and Kurosawa share the same narrative strategy of reaching for the general through specific details.


These adaptations break new ground in sound and spectacle. They serve as a vehicle for social reparation. They provide a forum where artists and audiences can grapple with the contemporary issues of racial and gender equality, and they forge a new path for world cinema and theatre.

*Featured image by Lucas Santos*
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