

“Caught in a Bad Romance”: Dissecting the Portrayal of Self-Destructive Heroines in Shakespeare and Lady Gaga

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Abstract:

Love is a smoke rais'd with the fume of sighs;
Being purg'd, a fire sparkling in a lover's eyes;
Being vex'd, a sea nourish'd with lovers' tears:
What is it else? a madness most discreet,
A choking gall and a preserving sweet (Romeo and Juliet 1.1.197 – 201)

So says Shakespeare about the all-consuming nature and power of love. Love is blinding, it is intoxicating, often making people forget where their allegiances lie. A theme that is well-explored in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, a story of star-crossed lovers caught between the crossfires of two families in conflict. Even after killing her cousin Tybalt, Juliet still roots for Romeo and is willing to go to any lengths to see their love find fulfilment. This act is nearly self-destructive, since her decision to defy her family ultimately leads to her own downfall. Elsewhere in the same vein, Lady Gaga, in her song *Bad Romance*, proclaims, “I want your love, and I want your revenge (Gaga 1:28). She writes about being in love, perhaps with the wrong kind of person. Yet she chooses to look the other way and become complicit in his “lover's revenge”, mirroring the way Juliet overlooks Romeo's faults and continues to reach out to him. This raises a central question: what do the heroines of Shakespeare and Gaga have in common? This paper endeavours to answer that question through a comparative approach.

Keywords: Shakespeare, love, self-destruction, conflict, death.

Introduction:

Love is a pervasive theme, a recurrent one running through the pages of books and literature written across centuries and cultures. It is an emotion that transcends languages and even species. Love is often the driving force that is responsible for the sustenance of relationships, be that between two life partners, a mother and child, siblings, or friends. It serves as a foundational element in sustaining a number of our social relations. "It is the universal principle undergirding all human activity, the object of all human striving" (Naugle 1). Furthermore, special emphasis is often laid on the importance of individuals finding suitable partners with whom they can chalk out a lifelong partnership. Love has been the muse and subject of countless poems, songs, and literary works for centuries, even a reading of the Holy Bible would enrich us with the tallest tales and lessons on love- motherly love, familial love, and above all, God's love for his children. As written in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son..." Thus, highlighting the self-sacrificial nature of love for a greater good.

Meditations on love can be traced back to the time of Plato and Aristotle. Irving Singer, author of *Philosophy of Love*, has argued that one can trace the roots of the philosophy of love back to "two principal sources: on the one hand Plato, his followers, and his critics; on the other hand Christianity arising out of Judaism and merging with Greek philosophy begun by Plato" (qtd.in Naugle 3). The *Symposium* presents some of Plato's most profound reflections on love. "His *Symposium* in particular had a significant impact: Spenser admired it, and, as will become clear, there is in fact a passage in the *Symposium* that Shakespeare knew and closely imitated" (Roland 2). By the time we arrive in the Middle Ages, depictions of love, specifically its romantic expression, manifested in the form of courtly love:

The courtly love relationship was shaped by the feudal relationship linking a knight with his feudal lord. This Knight attended to his courtly lady with the equal obedience and devotion which he reposed to his lordship. She was in total command of the love relationship, which he owed to her, showing respect and submission. The lady fanned the knight's aspirations for great deeds, and he acted accordingly to be worthy of her love (Kanwar 636).

The romantic trope developed significantly over time. During the Elizabethan era, this trope found rich, multifaceted, and nuanced expression in the works of the Bard of English literature.

Shakespeare has given the world some of the most memorable and endearing expressions of love that are immortalised in his plays and sonnets, giving us the endearing story of two star-crossed lovers in *Romeo and Juliet*, while giving us in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the aching portrayal of unrequited love. Shakespeare remarkably portrays love in all its forms and seasons.

Much has also been said and debated about the universality and timeless nature of Shakespeare's works. During the Elizabethan age, His works have also been translated into countless languages and adapted in various avatars across cultures and borders. He is also an important part of the popular imagination with his stories and characters reimagined in our modern-day world as movies, musicals, and even pop songs. "Critics, scholars, writers of various approaches and even filmmakers have been making attempts to work out and adapt Shakespeare's works since the twentieth century in diverse cultural contexts all over the world" (Kumar 124). It is Shakespeare's profoundly universal approach to portraying fundamental human emotions that enables us, as readers, to recognise and draw parallels between age-old Shakespearean characters and the newer figures of popular imagination that populate our contemporary world. It is Shakespeare's profoundly universal approach to portraying fundamental human emotions that enables us, as readers, to recognise and draw parallels

between age-old Shakespearean characters and the newer figures of popular imagination that populate our contemporary world. This paper thus takes a page out of this sentiment and endeavours to find similarities between one of Shakespeare’s most famous heroines, Juliet and Popular Music’s Icon Lady Gaga’s heroine as portrayed in her music video *Bad Romance*. This paper attempts to identify how these two heroines act in love, their similarities, and the point at which they diverge from each other’s journeys.

Love is a smoke rais’d with the fume of sighs;

Being purg’d, a fire sparkling in a lover’s eyes;

Being vex’d, a sea nourish’d with lovers’ tears:

What is it else? a madness most discreet,

A choking gall and a preserving sweet— *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 1, scene 1

So says Shakespeare about the all-consuming nature and power of love. Love is blinding, it is intoxicating, often making people forget where their allegiances lie. A theme that is well-explored in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, a story of star-crossed lovers caught between the crossfires of two families in conflict. Even after killing her cousin Tybalt, Juliet still roots for Romeo and is willing to go to any lengths to see their love find fulfilment. An act that is almost self-destructive in the sense that she goes against her family, which leads to her own destruction. Elsewhere in the same vein, Lady Gaga, in her song *Bad Romance*, proclaims:

I want your love, and I want your revenge

You and I could write a Bad Romance

I want your love and all your lovers’ revenge

I want your love (Gaga 1:28).

Gaga writes about being in love, perhaps with the wrong kind of person. However, she is willing to look the other way and be complicit in his "lover's revenge", the same way Juliet does and continues to build a bridge to Romeo. What might the heroines of Shakespeare and Lady Gaga have in common? This paper endeavours to answer that question through a comparative approach drawing inspiration from the universally acknowledged fact that the relevance of Shakespeare's works transcends time and place. Even in contemporary times, his works retain a lasting relevance, as evidenced by their numerous film adaptations, and they have also served as creative fodder for many popular songs. For instance, Dire Straits melodiously retells the tragic story of the star-crossed lovers in "Romeo and Juliet," while Taylor Swift's "Love Story" directly references the timeless tale of their love. For instance, Dire Straits melodiously retells the tragic story of the star-crossed lovers in "Romeo and Juliet," while Taylor Swift's "Love Story" directly references the timeless tale of their love.

His influence on popular culture is apparent and profound, particularly in matters of love, passion, and the human flaws that shape these experiences. "Shakespeare in popular culture, therefore, represents more than an ephemeral reference. He has become a cultural icon, and it is hard to conceive that his presence in popular culture today is insignificant" (Mouelhi 376).

Although Lady Gaga does not explicitly reference Shakespeare's work in her song, a keen reader can still discern a parallel between Juliet and Lady Gaga's heroine, particularly in their pursuit of romantic relationships that place them in situations decidedly unfavourable to their well-being. Young Juliet, impressionable and naïve, falls in love with Romeo, a member of a rival household. Her love, fuelled by passion, blinds her to the dangers of their relationship. Similarly, in Lady Gaga's *Bad Romance*, the female protagonist finds herself in an unfavourable situation. Nevertheless, she seems to have fallen in love with the very individual who is responsible for her plight. His character bears some resemblance to Romeo, who is described by Tybalt as "'tis he that villain, Romeo"(Shakespeare 1.5.277). The heroine of *Bad

Romance* finds herself, ironically, due to the actions of other women, catapulted into what appears to be a trafficking ring. However, Gaga's heroine seems to feel an irresistible attraction to her own perpetrator, the "villain" in her story. Thus, her predicament resembles Juliet's entrapment in a relationship with a lover from behind enemy lines. Both narratives reflect the complexities of love intertwined with danger, irrationality, and defiance. Building on these thematic intersections, this paper will use them as the foundation for a comparative analysis of the heroines in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Bad Romance* and assess how they navigate their circumstances after getting "caught in a Bad Romance"(Gaga 3:16).

In the thesis titled *Different Representations of Love in the Works of William Shakespeare* Kamila Vránková identifies a dimension of love and romance that undermines not only one's self-preservation and well-being but also that of the romantic relationship itself, and that is the element of "excessive passion". Vránkové states that in the Elizabethan context, particularly, "passion was understood as a manifestation of imbalance between will and reason and such disharmony was seen as resulting in consuming unsustainable love" (58). Further stating that "extreme passion debilitates love and leads over the course of time to destruction of heroes...love defined by pure passion cannot bear the tragic circumstances that characters come against and eventually fall to pieces" (Vránkové 58). The bond between Romeo and his very young lover is undoubtedly fuelled by an excess of passion that cripples their ability to make sensible decisions, thus clouding their judgment. Prior to meeting Juliet, Romeo is certain of his love and longing for Rosaline, which, however, swiftly disintegrates once he meets Juliet. As Friar Bacon aptly describes Romeo's love for Rosaline as "so soon forsaken? Young men's love then lies/not truly in their hearts but in their eyes" (Shakespeare 2.3.282). Sparks fly, passions ignite, and the young lovers forget where their allegiances lie. It is love at first sight for Juliet, as well. She instantaneously fixates her mind on this young man and nurtures the resolve to marry Romeo. She is willing to put herself in the way of danger in pursuit of her

love for Romeo, despite his possessing immoral characteristics. Furthermore, "rather than being concerned with the effects of their relationship on others, they are preoccupied mainly with fulfilling their own personal desires" (Vránkové 62). Her cousin Tybalt refers to Romeo as a villain, and indeed Romeo comes to possess a villainous character if we are to judge him by his act of killing Tybalt in a duel. Juliet, however, acts on an overflow of emotions, overpowering her senses. She hardly knows what to do with this surge of powerful feelings. In Act II, scene ii, she professes that her love for her newfound lover is immeasurable and overflowing; it is "as boundless as the sun" (280), her "love as deep; the more I give to thee the more I have" (Shakespeare 1.2.280). "However, she has not known pain until she meets her lover, and this tragic love path will affect and destroy her much quicker than it will destroy Romeo" (Malenkina 28). Even after her cousin Tybalt's death, Juliet seems to remain steadfast in her love for Romeo. She mourns Tybalt's death, but mourns even more the death of her lover. "Is Romeo slaughtered, is Tybalt dead? My dear-lov'd cousin, and my dearer Lord"(Shakespeare 3.2.289). Surely, her family's resolve to keep her away from Romeo only grows stronger, so does her resolve to defy the expectations put upon her to uphold her family's honour and thus the growing expectation to distance herself from her lover. Forbidden love, however, is a force to be reckoned with. Juliet is single-minded in her resolve to marry Romeo, so far as to isolate herself from her family and defy everything her family stands for. She willingly defies her family's expectations and is single-minded in being united with Romeo, in life and especially in death. "She risked all for the dim hope to live with Romeo in Mantua after waking up again and seeing that this plan had failed, she takes the consequence of this without hesitation or regret" (Schuchardt).

This willingness and resolve to pursue what is inherently bad for one's self-preservation seems to be echoed and resonated in Lady Gaga's hit 2009 release *Bad Romance*, where Gaga's heroine is expressing her love for a man who seems to embody villainous and crude

characteristic traits. The single is part of the Extended Play *The Fame Monster* and was written by the singer herself in collaboration with RedOne. In *Bad Romance*, Gaga explores the journey of a young woman who finds herself catapulted into a dangerous predicament. She has been sold off as a sex slave by a group of women and is presented in front of a man, most likely her bidder and thus gets entrapped in what she calls a "bad romance". However, to the viewer's surprise, "by the end of the song, the anonymous man who has won an evening with her is a smouldering skeleton while the singer herself is content to enjoy a post-arson cigarette by his side"(Robinson). In the song, she reiterates over and over again that she desires his "horror", his "design". In the ways that Romeo is a villain and a criminal and with blood on his hands, Gaga's lover too seems to be up to no good either, he has bought her or more precisely her body, with money. Surprisingly, she seems to take pride in and embrace his dangerous ways, and the prospect of it all is something that excites her. She fully embraces his crooked and evil mind:

I want your ugly, I want your disease

I want everything as long as it's free

I want your love (0:50).

She is complicit in his "lover's revenge" and expresses her desire to be part of his schemes; she wants his "love and his lover's revenge". Like Juliet, a faithful lover, she turns a blind eye to all that is bad about her lover. Assessing her stance, she is willing to be sucked into the exciting prospects that a forbidden love promises. "She pines for a destructive relationship that she knows will end in disaster. (Or, according to the music video, a signed bed and a corpse. (Either/or)...*Bad Romance* is an infectious catchy dance song about all the crazy, messed-up feelings people have for one another"(Suddath). However, this is where Gaga's heroine differs from mirroring Juliet's self-sacrificial and self-destructive tendencies,

for she only showcases and expresses a desire to fully annihilate herself in the pursuit of a lover who does not possess the most desirable characteristics. She seems to draw a feeling of adventurous excitement at the prospect of defying expectations and going after a love that is forbidden. Unlike Juliet, who embraces a more traditional approach in being a devoted lover and wife to the man of her dreams, Gaga's heroine is uniquely driven by the exciting prospect of defying societal norms and lets herself go wild on a journey that must feel like an enticing roller coaster ride. For Gaga's heroine, the journey is about deriving a sense of adventurous exhilaration from pursuing a love that is forbidden. While Juliet dies a death that is both literal and symbolic, Gaga's heroine finds the ultimate form of liberation as she sets fire to her prospective lover and even makes herself comfortable on the bed that is soaked in his ashes.

Juliet's inevitable path to destruction and a complete annihilation of the self can perhaps be attributed to the lack of agency from beginning to end, something that Gaga's heroine seems to be in control of at least towards the end of the music video. Juliet is a mere thirteen-year-old at the start of the play and finds the strings of her life being tugged and controlled by those around her. Her mother insists she must prepare for marriage for "younger than you, here in Verona, ladies of esteem, are already made mothers" (Shakespeare 1.3.274). The prospect, however, does not excite Juliet as she is asked to marry someone she has no interest in marrying. Furthermore, she is bitterly and threateningly served an ultimatum from her father: marry the groom of his choice or stand the chance of having her ties severed from him. This is all too intimidating for a girl as young as Juliet, one who is yet to see the world and discover the feelings and power of love for the first time in her life. In the face of such a strong oppressive force, Juliet most validly feels the need to resist, which, in a twisted turn of events, leads to her own destruction and ultimate demise.

Juliet's continued and dedicated insistence on marrying Romeo could very well be perceived as a desperate attempt to gain some semblance of control over her own life. The path

to resistance is what leads to her downfall. Kayla Vokolek observes that "in an environment where a dissatisfied yet determined young girl's every decision is decided by her father, and then, according to her family's wishes, by her much older fiancé, the opportunity to marry Romeo presents a way to claim some independence". In contrast, Gaga's heroine writes her own story as she clearly sings, "Me and you can write a bad romance," placing herself before her lover and prioritizing her own desires over his. The pen is indeed in her hand; she possesses the free will that Juliet so sorely lacks and continually strives for. The pen is indeed in her hand; she possesses the free will that Juliet so sorely lacks and continually strives for. In doing so, she can achieve what Helene Cixous describes as the reclamation of the self. "According to Cixous, writing and creating a feminine empire of writing would allow women to redefine their relationships with men, with the world, and with themselves" (qtd. in Uniyal).

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