

# On Gottfried Keller's *A Village Romeo and Juliet* and Shakespeare Adaptation in General

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## Abstract

The article suggests a re-thinking of how adaptation should be discussed, using the example of Gottfried Keller's tale *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, one of the great works of European literature, which is commonly considered to be an adaptation of Shakespeare's play. After discussing it as such the article shows, on the basis of Keller's own statements, that the relationship between the tale and Shakespeare's play is more complex. Both Shakespeare and Keller draw on a shared myth, and their versions are items in a long and rich tradition that does not necessarily progress in a linear fashion and does not include only literary texts but all kinds of artifacts.

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## Introduction

Adaptation has been an important topic in recent years, in literary studies in general (Hutcheon 2006 and Hutcheon and O'Flynn 2013; Sanders 2006), and in Shakespeare studies in particular (Huang and Rivlin 2014). There has been an attempt to move away from the "'fidelity debates' . . . when adaptations were being judged in terms of quality by how close or far they were from their 'original' or 'source' texts" (Hutcheon and O'Flynn 2013, xxvi). What has usually remained, not surprisingly, is the focus on the relationship between a source and its adaptation, albeit not in terms of fidelity (Sanders 2006, 18-19), but rather, for example, in terms of dialogue with each other (Desmet 2014).

Daniel Fischlin, in "A Note on Adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*," offers the following definition:

Adaptation . . . requires interpretation and some form of creative engagement with or disengagement from a source text, the latter being a point of departure for the adapter. Adaptation allows for a full continuum of possibility, from the most radical remaking of a text to the most conformist recreation of the same text. When an adapter begins the process

of engaging with a prior text, anything is possible and that fact makes adaptation a place where different forms of artistic vision, different forms of interpretation come into being, and frequently, into conflict. (Fischlin 2007)

*Romeo and Juliet* is probably the Shakespeare play that has most frequently been adapted. Fischlin, in his note of thirteen closely printed pages, lists examples from opera, ballet, music, cinema, television, the stage, computer games, and, yes, literature. Here, just one of the texts he mentions will be discussed, Gottfried Keller's "Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe," or in its English version (which will be quoted here) *A Village Romeo and Juliet*. Keller's tale will be first considered as a work derived from Shakespeare's play. Based on Keller's own statements on the tale, an alternative approach will then be sketched, which casts the relationship between the play and the tale in a rather different light. This will make it possible to say something about not only adaptation but also the study of Shakespeare in general.

### Keller's Tale

Gottfried Keller's *A Village Romeo and Juliet* is one of the classics of its genre in European literature, and has been translated into many languages. Being about young people, it is frequently dealt with in German-speaking schools, like Shakespeare's play — with the usual unfortunate results such forced reading often entails. In German criticism, the tale would be classified as a *Novelle*, a genre particularly popular in the nineteenth century, which is distinguished from the novel as a story of medium length, firmly plotted and concentrating on one extraordinary event, in Goethe's words, on "a shocking incident that has actually occurred" (Eckermann 2006, 29 January 1827; my translation). The tale was first published in Keller's collection *Die Leute von Seldwyla* [Seldwyla Folks] (1856), a collection of stories set in an imaginary Swiss town (figure 1). Most of the tales are comedies, casting a pleasantly satirical light on the foibles of Seldwyla inhabitants. *A Village Romeo and Juliet* is certainly an exception.

As the tale is little known in the English-speaking world, a short summary will be offered here, which, however, also has two additional aims: it suggests the leisurely realist style of Keller's writing (perhaps encouraging readers to turn to the full text itself); more importantly, taking the knowledge of Shakespeare's play for granted, it focuses on the points that invite comparison and will be taken up afterwards. As we shall see, this comparison will lead to rather surprising results.

The story deals with two families of farmers, the Manzes and the Martis, and their children, Sali and Verena. The narrative begins with a memorable, idyllic scene near a village in the vicinity of Seldwyla:

[T]here some years ago were three splendid long fields lying side by side and stretching afar over the gentle slope like three gigantic ribbons. One sunny morning in September two farmers were out plowing in two of these fields — to be explicit, the two outside ones. The middle one had apparently been lying there untilled and desolate for years, for it was covered with stones and high weeds, and a world of little winged creatures were buzzing about in it undisturbed. (Keller 2008, 1)

Both farmers gradually widen their own fields and throw stones on the one in-between. For their children, who bring them food, however, the middle field offers a playground, and Keller describes their games in some detail. He goes on:

Harvest followed harvest, and each saw the children grown larger and handsomer, and the ownerless field grown narrower between its widened neighbors. With every plowing it had lost on either side the width of one furrow, and not a word had been said about it, and seemingly no human eye had noticed the crime. (Keller 2008, 9-10)

The middle field actually belongs to the inheritance of a poor fellow, an outcast, who does not have the legal and financial means to claim it. When it is finally auctioned off by the authorities, both farmers bid for it, but only one of them can buy it. And "from this day forth the two farmers were in litigation with each other, and did not rest until they were both ruined" (Keller 2008, 14). They both eventually lose their farms.

Years later, Sali and Verena, now young adults, meet again and fall in love. But they are aware that their dream of founding a respectable family, bourgeois in the best sense, cannot come true, especially after Sali, in defending Verena against the violence of her father, has hit her father's head with a stone, which left him a cretin. In their plight, the lovers enjoy a last day together, walking in the countryside, being acknowledged as a beautiful young couple, visiting a local fair, giving little gifts to each other — time outside time, as it were. As the day passes, they are caught up again in their desperate situation.

It is then that a grotesque figure without a name, the Black Fiddler, the actual owner of the disputed field, who has intermittently appeared before, meets them and seems to offer them a way out — life among the poor, outside the well-regulated society of the well-to-do farmers, something the lovers cannot accept. Sali and Verena spend the evening at an inn in the woods, ironically called "Paradise Garden," where the poor congregate. They dance and celebrate a kind of mock-wedding, officiated by the fiddler. Then they leave, moving towards the river nearby, where a hay-boat is tied which is to serve for their wedding night. They climb it; Sali unties the boat.

[A]s they sat there aloft the boat gradually drifted out into the middle of the river, and then floated, slowly turning, downstream . . . And as the morning glow appeared, a city with its towers emerged from the silver-gray stream. The setting moon, as red as gold, made a shining path up the stream, and crosswise on this the boat drifted slowly along. As it drew near the city, two pallid forms, locked in close embrace, glided down in the frost of the autumn morning from the dark mass into the cold waters. (Keller 2008, 83-84)

### Keller's Tale as an Adaptation

What is the relationship between *Romeo and Juliet* and Keller's tale? There is obviously a double change of medium: English is turned into German, and, more importantly, the stage-play is turned into a narrative for reading. The presence of a narrator offers space for epic description and the detailed analysis of the figures' motivation.

The similarities between the two versions, suggested by the title, seem to be fairly obvious. The protagonists are of equal status. Their parents are enemies of each other. They experience love as something beyond their control. The young man commits a violent act against a member of the other family, and this makes the official coming together of the lovers impossible. A person outside the action offers them the possibility of an alternative solution; and the action ends in the lovers' suicide (see Stebner 1982). The similarities may be fairly obvious. But it is also obvious that the account has to choose its words rather carefully and to leave out significant elements.

The differences are as striking and more telling: in Keller there are no gangs of retainers fighting each other, there is no Duke, no Nurse, no County Paris, no feast, no banishment of the protagonist, no unfortunate coincidence and misunderstanding leading to the suicide of the lovers, and there is no peace between the families at the end. As the title of the tale indicates, the setting is moved from the city of fair Verona to the Swiss countryside, from high society to the milieu of farmers and small towns. The events are moved from the timeless present of drama to the preterit of Keller's (and his first readers') own time. The story is also moved from an imaginative Elizabethan romantic view of things (and the respective language) to the prosaic conditions of nineteenth-century poetic realism, with its emphasis on character and motivation. In Shakespeare the enmity between the two families is introduced in the Prologue as an "ancient grudge" (line 3) and then taken for granted without further elaboration.<sup>1</sup> In Keller it is introduced in epic breadth and motivated by the greed and stubbornness of the two farmers, representatives of contemporary social conditions.

Similar things happen to the relationship between the lovers: in Shakespeare it is love at first sight that sweeps both Romeo and Juliet off their feet. In Keller their relationship develops, always well-motivated, over a long period, from childhood to young adulthood. Finally, a strange

transformation happens to Shakespeare's Friar, a marginal figure in the play, who tries to help the lovers, but who, in a manner that has left many critics dissatisfied, messes up things. The analogous figure in Keller may be seen in the Black Fiddler (Clouser 1978, 162), a demonic figure, who, as the legal owner of the disputed field, is also a central figure in the tale.

Is the relationship between Shakespeare's play and Keller's tale then of the kind that warrants the term adaptation? The title certainly suggests that we should read it as such. Comparing the two versions is also bound to be suggestive, because it makes us focus on relationships, on similarities and differences.

### Shakespeare is Not the Source

It may therefore come as a surprise that Keller insists, in good realist fashion, that his tale is based on an actual occurrence, one that he found reported in a Zurich newspaper:

Saxony. In the village of Altsellershausen, near Leipzig, a young man of 19, and a young woman of 17, loved each other, both children of poor people, who, however, lived in mortal enmity with each other, and would not permit the betrothal of the two. On August 15 the lovers went to an inn where poor people were enjoying themselves, where they danced until 1 o'clock, and then left. In the morning the corpses of the two lovers were found in the fields, they had shot themselves. (Sautermeister 2006, 69; my translation)

Other elements do not point either to *Romeo and Juliet* as a source: Keller's early sketches for the tale — there is one in poetic form — are based on the scene of the two farmers ploughing.

The title, the only explicit connection between Shakespeare's play and the tale, may well have been an afterthought: it is actually first mentioned by the publisher when the tale went to print (Morgenthaler 2014). We can try and make the thought experiment of reading the story with a different title in the style of other titles in the collection of *Die Leute von Seldwyla*, for example "Sali and Verena" or "The Black Fiddler." The story would lose none of its power, on the contrary, it could be argued that it gains additional force, because the title does not limit readers' expectations by giving away its ending (Rehder 1943).

Indeed, one of the early reviewers, a promoter of realist local literature ("Dorfliteratur"), Berthold Auerbach, severely criticized the title:

The title of this tale seems to me to be entirely inappropriate; it imposes a mood . . . and moves us into that kind of literary literature, which is not based on real life, but on the life of print and its memories, and which I would have hoped we have left behind us. (Sautermeister 2006, 132-33; my translation)

Keller responded to this criticism in a letter to Auerbach:

I do have to defend the title of the tale. Firstly, what we write ourselves, is also printed on paper and thus is part of the paper world, and secondly, Shakespeare, even though printed on paper, is life itself and not a lifeless reminiscence. If I had not added a note on the actual occurrence of the anecdote and on its similarity to the Shakespearean matter, I should have been blamed for a labored and silly repetition, whereas, after the short note, the story gets a legitimate point, for those who had not even thought of Romeo and Juliet would then have considered the matter far too gross and bizarre. (Sautermeister 2006, 113; my translation)

In other words, Keller included Romeo and Juliet in the title not as a source, but in order to place the tale in a specific context, to create a "dialogic interaction" (Desmet 2014, 55) with the play, one that helps readers to deepen their understanding of the tale (and the play).

The brief note at the very beginning of the tale to which Keller refers deserves closer attention. It is usually read as declaring his commitment to realism in the arts. But it goes beyond this. It says something about the relationship between different texts of a similar kind.

To tell this story would be an idle imitation, were it not founded upon an actual occurrence showing how deeply rooted in human life is each of those plots on which the great works of the past are based. The number of such plots is not great, but they are constantly reappearing in new dress, and then they constrain the hand to hold them fast. (Keller 2008, 1)

In other words, Shakespeare's play and Keller's tale are based on a common source. The common source is one of those plots "deeply rooted in human life," i.e. in actual events, that circulate in a culture and organize the lives and perceptions of those that share it; in other words, their common source is myth — in the sense we associate with classical myth. The words "Romeo and Juliet" in the title of the tale do not refer to Shakespeare's play, but to the myth we have come to name after it.

### Rhizomatic Relationships

This offers an alternative account to the one-to-one relationship commonly taken for granted, which links source and adaptation directly. Now both Shakespeare's play and Keller's tale are versions in a series, sharing recurring elements in a protean fashion, where each new text may call upon all the texts that have preceded it. As one critic, perhaps casting his net somewhat widely, has summarized the myth (he calls it a legend):

In its antique grandeur, the legend of the frustrated lovers who are united only through the ultimate sacrifice of their lives has retained its simple contour from the times of Hero and Leander down to Keller's novelle. Whether it be the vows of priesthood, the feud of two families, the obstacle of nature, or the ire of the fathers, which stands between the two lovers, in each case the fundamental situation is that of unconditional love attaining its consummation in the destruction of the two lovers themselves. (Rehder 1943, 416)

More narrowly we may begin the series with Masuccio's *Novellino* (1476). In da Porto's *Historia novellamente ritrovata di due nobili amanti* (1524), the names and the setting are already the same as in Shakespeare. On the basis of Bandello's version (1554) Arthur Brooke created his English verse version *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* (1562), in which he did away with the lovers' farewell on their deathbed. Versions continue in Shakespeare's *An Excellent and Conceited Tragedie of Romeo and Juliet* (1597) and *The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedie of Romeo and Juliet* (1599), which is 688 lines longer, texts known by Shakespeareans as Q1 and Q2, and their offshoots in later editions down to contemporary ones. Versions continue, to give a few examples, in Otway's *The History and Fall of Caius Martius* (1679), where Juliet's balcony appears for the first time and the farewell of the lovers on their deathbed becomes again part of the story, and, famously, Garrick's version (1748), Keller's tale (1856), Gounod's opera (1867), Tchaikovsky's symphonic poem (1870), Prokofiev's ballet (1935), Bernstein's *West Side Story* (1957), filmic versions, the translations into other languages, but also paintings, statues, monuments, like Juliet's house and grave in Verona, and so on. And of course all theater productions of *Romeo and Juliet* should also be seen in such a series. The closest analogy to the situation may be the one we find with the traditional ballad, where different versions have been recorded at different times and in different places.

What does taking seriously this rich tradition mean for students of Shakespeare? Their interest will no longer be focused so much on an authoritative text and versions derived from it. Rather, they will see the development of the Romeo and Juliet story, not in terms of a line or a tree, but of a rhizome, which makes all kinds of connections possible. In a seminal essay, Douglas Lanier has developed this idea, with the help of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 2004):

If we conceive of our shared object of study not as Shakespeare the text but as the vast web of adaptations, allusions and (re)productions that comprises the ever-changing cultural phenomenon we call "Shakespeare," the rhizome can offer a compelling theoretical model . . . to think rhizomatically about the Shakespearean text is to foreground its

fundamentally adaptational nature — as a version of prior narratives, as a script necessarily imbricated in performance processes, as a text ever in transit between manuscript, theatrical and print cultures, as a work dependent upon its latter-day producers for its continued life. (Lanier 2014, 29)

### How to Study Adaptation

Students of Shakespeare will take an interest in the conditions that made the emergence and the effectiveness of various versions (including the authoritative texts) possible. They will take an interest in questions of transmission between different versions (and not only between texts, but between all kinds of cultural artifacts). They will take an interest in the reasons for the similarities and differences between the versions, to use Keller's words, between the dresses in which the myth reappears (see also Engler 1996). Studying theatrical productions, for example, they will not privilege the relationship of the production to the version available in what has become the canonical text, but pay as much attention to other theatrical versions.

Still, would they not be denying our sense that Shakespeare is the authoritative source of it all, unlike with the traditional ballad, where authorship is rarely an issue? They would not be denying Shakespeare's role, but put it in context. Here the experience of the HyperHamlet project at Basel University may be instructive. It researches Shakespeare quotations — versions on a small scale (Engler, Hohl Trillini, and Quassdorf). It emerged that surprisingly many phrases we now ascribe to Shakespeare had already been current in general discourse before him; "to be or not to be" may be the most prominent example (Hohl Trillini 2009).

We ascribe such elements to Shakespeare because of the towering importance he has gained in our culture. He has become a mythical figure himself, of which, in rhizomatic fashion, many versions exist: that of the creative genius. Even Keller, in spite of his view that there is nothing new under the sun, pays homage to him, when he says, in his letter to Auerbach, that Shakespeare "is life itself." This myth gained strength from the early eighteenth century, and reached its climax in the age of the Romantics when his words acquired a degree of sacredness, when "it was no longer the critic who judged Shakespeare but Shakespeare who judged the critic" (Engler 2003, 33). To give just one example: it was an 1845 production that — after about 100 years — did away with Garrick's very effective conversation of the lovers on their deathbed, and used the canonical Shakespeare text instead (Shakespeare 2012, 67-68).

In recent years we have gestured towards a more open understanding of Shakespeare's authorship. We may have abandoned the view that there should be a single text authored and authorized by Shakespeare, but the single text is still reinforced by the necessities of preparing



popular editions. We may have come to accept the possibility of revised versions, but we still insist on the revisions having been approved by Shakespeare. We may have accepted the possibility of collaboration, but even attribution studies seem to see an important task in determining what is truly by the great author's hand. Theatrical productions use the available versions freely, but they still insist on doing so under Shakespeare's name. The authority of Shakespeare, the creative genius, is such that it continues to play an important role in shaping new versions — but it does so not as the only source, but rather as part of a rhizome, as an important *resource*.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that we should consider Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* the source and origin of Keller's *A Village Romeo and Juliet* — even though Keller warns us against it.

### Notes

1. All references to *Romeo and Juliet* are from the third Arden edition, edited by René Weis (Shakespeare 2012).

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Figure 4: Richard Giblett, *Mycelium Rhizome* (2009), Van Handel Collection, Melbourne. Image courtesy of the artist and Murray White Room, Melbourne.

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