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## The transformation of Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* into a vehicle for satirizing the Cretan vendetta in the film *The Fairy and the Lad* (1969)

### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the subject of an age-old hatred (vendetta) between two families, as it appears in two different and distant but interrelated artistic works: Shakespeare's Renaissance tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* and the Greek film comedy *The Fairy and the Lad* (*I Neraida kai to palikari*, 1969), written by the playwright Lakis Michaelides and directed by Dinos Dimopoulos. On the one hand, Shakespeare's work has often been the object of adaptation into various genres of erudite and popular culture (such as popular novels, illustrated classics and shadow puppet theatre). On the other hand, the custom of vendetta has been the subject of film representations as a dramatic cultural manifestation or subversive comic device (e.g. *Dead City*, 1951; *Makrikostaioi and Kontogiorgides*, 1960, respectively). Firstly, this essay aims to compare Shakespeare's play with the Greek film adaptation and explain how Shakespeare's tragedy is transformed into a comic mechanism satirizing the phenomenon of the Cretan vendetta. Secondly, it investigates the inverted characteristics of the vendetta as represented in the film comedy in question. It explores the efforts by the scriptwriter and director to shift the rationale of hatred towards the rationale of love. The film by Michaelides and Dimopoulos transforms Shakespeare's tragedy into a highly commercial comedy with film stars Alikì Vougiouklaki and Dimitris Papamichael, parodying the mentality of bloody revenge.

KEYWORDS: *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare, *The Fairy and the Lad*, Dimopoulos-Michaelides, Greek film adaptation, satire, Cretan vendetta

This paper aims to examine the issue of conflict and rupture through the peculiar form of the unwritten custom of the Cretan vendetta. It will approach the phenomenon through the filters of the artists who dealt with it, especially during the 1960s boom period in Greek commercial cinema and in the context of the phenomenon of star protagonists, with particular regard to Alikì Vougiouklaki and Dimitris Papamichael, the "national" protagonist duo of the time. The paper

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will focus on the 1969 film *The Fairy and the Lad*, directed by Dinos Dimopoulos and written by the renowned post-war commercial Greek theatre playwright Lakis Michaelides.

The film is a free adaptation and comedy interpretation of the theme in Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, without missing a few echoes of the Renaissance writer's *Taming of the Shrew*. The adaptation and transfer of classical masterpieces to mass consumption media such as the popular novel, shadow theatre (Karagiozis) or commercial cinema has been common practice since the interwar period. These media are the communication channels that traditionally disseminated high art to the lower or more popular social strata who had no other way of gaining access to canonical masterpieces than through mass forms of entertainment (Moullas 2007, 167-171). Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was a popular source for the interwar and postwar Karagiozis shadow theatre, as well as for classic illustrated works. Additionally, the Greek film adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* was adapted into a popular novel, which helped to further validate the film's commercial success and establish it as a popular read. (Michaelides 2001a, 7-13).<sup>1</sup>

The central theme in the film is the age-old enmity due to rivalry between two wealthy Cretan families by the name of Fourtounakis and Vrontakis, by analogy with the Capulets and the Montagues, the two noble families of Verona in Shakespeare's play. The central motif of the plot in both works is the love between the only children of the rival families. In the case of the film comedy, love is the key to overcoming hatred. This leads to a happy resolution, unlike Shakespeare's play, where the tragic end of the two young lovers leads to reconciliation between their families.

The adaptation of a Shakespearean play and its transfer to Greek commercial cinema brings about a series of interventions and alterations to the plot aimed at attracting a mass audience. By exploiting the comic element and featuring the star actors of its era, the movie highlighted the issue of the vendetta, a significant social problem, especially in mountainous Crete (Tsiropoulos 2004, 17; Xyritakis 2011, 16; Vlachadi et al. 2013, 67-68).

In the Greek film adaptation of the play, the two opposing families live in a village (Agios Nikolaos) in Crete. The villagers are equally divided into two camps, supporting either one family or the other. This reality is visually emphasized several times in the film, with the two groups entering the village square from different sides ready to attack, brandishing weapons, lit torches and rakes in their hands to crush the enemy. A new police sergeant arrives in the village – a Rumeliot by descent, with the appropriate accent, drawing on the stock figure of the Rumeliot evzone in theatrical revue, where Michaelides's origins as a playwright lay. Together with the village president and the priest, this new broom sets his sights on something that has so far proved impossible: reconciliation between the two families, so as to enable the village to prosper in a climate of peace, tranquility and serenity. In the Fourtounakis family, the leading role aside from the father is played by his dynamic daughter Katerina, who, as a female member of the family, is shown to be just as capable if not better at the demanding chores of the village than a man. Katerina is fit for ten sons, as her father claims. Besides being beautiful, her characteristics and abilities are that she works in the vineyards, loads grapes onto the donkeys, and fishes

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<sup>1</sup> Lakis Michaelides suggests that he had adapted the story of *Romeo and Juliet* as a short novel before it became a film.

and sells her catch in the village market. At the same time, with her excellent voice, she sings and helps her father out in their tavern. Katerina is orphaned of her mother, but has her aunt Despina by her side, who has raised her and is reminiscent of Juliet's Shakespearean nurse.

On the other hand, the rival Vrontakis family has a son, Manousos, who has been taken to Athens and raised there since childhood. His father moved him away not to avoid rekindling the old feud, but to prevent him from falling in love with the daughter of the Fourtounakis family. Said to be a "maestro at zeibekiko", Manousos has not been back to the island since he was a small child, and his mentality is entirely different both from that of his family and Katerina herself, who, imbued with hatred for the Vrontakis clan, often expresses her enmity and anger towards it. She represents the preservation of the unwritten laws of vigilante justice as if she were a male, as the customary law of vendetta would require for the boys in a family (Moutzourpoulou 2017, 14-15). In contrast, Manousos characterizes vendetta as a relic of medieval times: "But where do we live? In the Middle Ages?" he muses, considering those who maintain and believe in it to be fools. He even mentions that if he likes Katerina, "everything else is resolved", disregarding the conflict between the two families and often mocking the perceptions of his parents and his village. The film visually highlights the medieval feud with the use of Byzantine-like furniture filling the rooms of the house, and motifs in costumes. This creates a pre-Renaissance or Renaissance atmosphere, together with the arched angles in the two mansions and the airy veils worn by the female protagonist during romantic or dramatic scenes. At the same time, the remarkably repetitive use of the flaming (ancient Greek) torch in crowd scenes combines with percussion music to emphasize the hatred between the families and the tension of the situation.

From the film's beginning, the reason for the feud between the two families remains unknown. The causes that created it go back to the Middle Ages if not earlier. When the newly-arrived sergeant asks whether a vendetta is to blame, the answer is "no one remembers, and no one knows." However, the fact remains that in line with the dictates of comedy, not one drop of blood is spilt. Although the hatred is presented as unholy, no one can articulate the cause – not even the representatives of the two families themselves. They only know that the feud had its roots maybe as far back as four centuries ago, and that it is unclear who initiated it. The most extraordinary hatred is that felt by Katerina. Manousos, on the other hand, does not take threatening words about the feud seriously, claiming against the demands of the comedy and for the viewer's complacency that "for years now the village has been slaughtered, but only in the tavern".

The feud extends to a series of social and economic rivalries between the two families: Katerina's engagement to a wealthy landowner from Chania causes Manousos' father to bring his son back from Athens to fix him up with an equally wealthy bride, Lenio, who has half the city of Rethymno as her dowry. Manousos, as his father points out, will not receive one olive less than the dowry that Fourtounakis' daughter is to be given at her wedding to the uncouth Skandalakis. The two young protagonists, Katerina and Manousos, are destined to meet at the former's engagement party, but Manousos does not reveal his true identity. As the voice of progress that transcends hatred, he will only tell Katerina who he really is once he is sure she is in love with him. Manousos is simply referred to as "the lad" up until that point – but when his

actual name comes out, the girl gets so angry that she shoots him (but misses), only to realize afterwards that the hatred she stands for is not hers: "Hate be damned. Why was I raised with it? Yet love is so beautiful, so sweet." To test her feelings, Manousos pretends to be engaged to Lenio. This leads to a similar engagement and revelry scene, where Katerina appears disguised as a boy to sabotage her lover's engagement. Women often appear disguised as men or boys in Shakespearean comedy, but not in the tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*. In the case of the film, the ruse is a repeat of a successful one performed a year earlier, with the same cast, in the equally commercial film *The Lady and the Tramp* (*I Archontisa kai o alitis*): Rena, the protagonist, disguises herself as a boy named Pippi to escape a marriage of convenience imposed by her father.

Once Katerina's disguise in Cretan men's baggy breeches and high boots is blown, her angry father locks her in the basement with nothing but water. Similarly, Manousos' father disowns him and sends him to Athens for "betraying hatred". Just before Katerina decides to take some poison she finds in her new prison, she is spirited away by Manousos, who has not in fact left the island. The couple end up in a church, where they ask Father Nicholas to marry them. The priest accepts the lie he will be forced to tell, not without hesitation, but because he fears that many innocent souls will die in the clash between the two families. Despite fear of a new feud, the priest contrives a lie, yet one justified in the eyes of God since it will bring happiness: the two young lovers lie down and feign death in an adjoining chamber. At the same time, Father Nicholas calls the village to church by tolling the bells in mourning. Faced with the sight of the two young lovers and thinking that they are dead, their parents regretfully realize their destructive hatred and are reconciled, only to discover soon afterwards that their children are alive and that their love has conquered hatred and death. The film ends with the two newlyweds being welcomed back from their honeymoon in the harbour, with feasts and Cretan dancing to reconcile the village. Katerina's former fiancé Skandalakis wants to start a new feud with Manousos for stealing his wife, but is ridiculed and ends up in the sea.

As seen above, the main features of the feud in the Demopoulos-Michailidis film assume comic tones, especially in the figure of the son, Manousos Vrontakis. Contrary to expectations, the vendetta does not take place in the mountainous and pastoral landscape of Crete, but is instead enacted by the sea. This is followed by various shots of the lake in Agios Nikolaos and the rocky coastal area just below the personal residence that director Nikos Koundouros lent to filmmaker Dinos Dimopoulos to shoot the film (Zervos 2018). It is unclear why the feud between the two families started, as no one in the village remembers exactly who began it or when, highlighting its insignificance. In the film, the conflict between the two families does not take on the characteristics of an honour feud; its content is constantly unclear, while the hatred is self-referential, hatred for hatred's sake. However, a sense of rivalry between the two families is cultivated, especially on the economic level. Manousos' "exile" to Athens as a child is not arranged so that the two families do not kill each other when the male member of the family grows up, but so that the two young descendants do not fall for each other. There are of course the mediators needed to reconcile the two families. In the film just as in reality, they are persons of authority or prestige (Moutzouropoulou 2017, 65): in this case the police sergeant, the village president and especially the priest, who, as in Shakespeare's masterpiece, plays a catalytic role, together with the nanny/Despina, both in the couple's relationship and in the final outcome.

We will not dwell here on the detailed differences between the Greek film and Shakespeare's play. The screenwriter and playwright (Lakis Michaelides) was definitely not aiming at a faithful cinema adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. After all, the Italian filmmaker Franco Zeffirelli had made a very successful one a year earlier, in 1968. That film is likely to have influenced the Greek screenwriter in his choice of subject matter from the Shakespearean original, which he adapted not only to the Cretan setting of the feud between the two families but also to the star protagonist strategy in the Greek film system, which he was familiar with from his previous collaborations with the Vouyouklaki-Papamichael duo and director Dinos Dimopoulos. According to Lakis Michaelides, demand for scripts in the 1960s outstripped supply, leading film producers to resort to adaptations of plays for lack of ready material (Michaelides 2001a, 7-8). He claims that from a relatively young age, he wrote stories that he kept aside to develop into novels later on. One of these was "Fourtounakis and Vrontakis", the script version of which he began writing in the summer of 1969 while on holiday at a tourist resort close to Agios Nikolaos in Crete. During the vacation he received a phone call from the film producer Philopoimin Finos asking him to give him a script that would be as successful as *The Lady and the Tramp*, and even urging him to have it ready as soon as possible, "because we're in a hurry to shoot the second film of the season with Aliki and Dimitris" (Michaelides 2001a, 8-11; Michaelides 2005, 75-76). Michaelides relates that the script was finished within ten days, upon which director Dinos Dimopoulos arrived in Crete. They chose the filming locations, got down to work, and the film was ready within two months (Michaelides 2001a, 12-13). The first screening date was in December of the same year (Soldatos 2001, 141; Soldatos 2020, 217-218).

The speed at which Michaelides describes things is not exaggerated. One only needs to take a cursory glance at director Dinos Dimopoulos' filmography to realize the industrial pace at which films were being made at the time, with first screening dates by the same director often occurring just a month or two apart. The inescapable conclusion is that they were either shot extremely quickly or sometimes in parallel, with the help of an assistant director. For example, *The Lady and the Tramp* was in theatres in December 1968, while *An Italian Girl in Kypseli* (script again by D. Dimopoulos) had premiered only two months earlier. Similarly, *The Victim* (script by Michaelides) followed two months after *The Lady and the Tramp*. Staying with the Michaelides-Dimopoulos duo, *The Teacher with the Blonde Hair* (script by D. Dimopoulos) was screened on 26 October 1969, with *To leventopaido* (script by Michaelides) just a fortnight later, on 10 November, while *The Fairy and the Lad* opened on 22 December (Soldatos 2020, 212-218). The 1960s were particularly prolific for both Demopoulos and Michaelides. In particular, Demopoulos' collaboration with the leading Vougiouklaki-Papamichael duo began with *Astero* in 1959 and *Madalena* in 1960, along with a series of films by other directors, such as *Maiden's Cheek* (*To ksilo vgike apo ton Paradiso* by Alekos Sakellarios), *I Aliki sto naftiko* and many others. They were titles that firmly established the two protagonists on the screen, in a partnership career that would last until the beginning of the following decade, when Greek commercial cinema began to wane and the "national" couple separated both professionally and personally (Blathras, 2003, 48-50). The collaboration between Demopoulos and Michaelides would continue into the early 1970s (*Piso mou s' eho, satana, Agapisa mia... polithrona, Vassoula and the Bases*). Demopoulos

directed a few more films over the ensuing years, the last being *The Craziest Guy in Greece* in 1983 and *The Little Dolphins* (*Ta delfinakia tou Amvrakikou*) in 1993 (Soldatos 2020, 220-232).

Meanwhile, Lakis Michaelides was to continue his career, writing scripts for video films and mostly revue numbers for the 1980s and early 1990s theatre. Nostalgia for the commercial cinema of the 1960s led him to publish *The Fairy and the Lad* in the form of a popular novel in 2001, enriching it with photographic footage from the film. It was a relatively pluralistic process, in an attempt to revive popular commercial cinema in the equally popular medium of the illustrated novel, with scenes from the film (Michaelides 2001a).<sup>2</sup>

In conclusion, apart from the commercial character of the film itself and perhaps the topicality of the Cretan feud as subject material – a real-life family feud reared its head in 1969, filling the pages of the daily press the very same year the film was shot – one wonders whether in the post-war era, and especially during the dictatorship, the concept and meaning of the vendetta was not simply a narrow regionalist phenomenon in the hands of the filmmakers. It may well also have referenced the repeated civil wars in Greek history, ideological and otherwise, from the post-occupation period right down to the junta in power at the time the film was made.

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<sup>2</sup> Michaelides also published the story of *The Lady and the Tramp* in the same novel format (Michaelides 2001b).