



## *From Romeo and Juliet to Rosaline & Benvolio: Refashioning Shakespearean Teenage Lovers*

by Laura Tosi

The history of adaptations of Shakespeare's plays for young audiences of the last three centuries is very much a tale of drama turned into narrative, with the same story being abridged, distilled, or expanded into the different plots of each adaptation (see Marchitello 2003). And even now, despite the presence of a lot of visual Shakespeare or other media (manga, cartoons, and comics), interactive websites, and movies, a lot of prose narrative versions of Shakespeare are still being written, which testifies to the power of Shakespeare story, or storytelling Shakespeare. The transposition from dramatic mode to narrative mode has an enormous impact on plot, time-place coordinates, character/setting presentation, and perspective. Transposing drama into narrative also means making a number of critical decisions about compression and expansion, as Shakespeare himself must have known well in his position of adapter of prose novellas into drama. Obviously, while Shakespeare's theatrical text can keep all interpretive choices open, retellings on the one hand narrow the spectrum of interpretations, changing a dialogical theatrical form into a linear monological narrative, but on the other hand they offer new interpretations of events, new perspectives on the characters, while adding motivations.

The Lambs, with their collection *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807) were the first of many generations of adapters to cut substantial portions of the plot (especially



subplots), single characters, as well as bawdy talk and double-entendres. The Lambs' "formula" is still used in many retellings today – by introducing an omniscient narrator who often appropriates the characters' words as his own and intrudes with comments and interpretations, the Lambs and their followers created out of the wealth of contradictory assertions and perspectives offered by the plays, a stable view of character and action (see Riehl 1980). They also tend to separate characters into good and bad according to the logic of the fairy tale and each character is introduced through a label which immediately clarifies his or her moral traits (see Tosi 2014: 31-48).

It would seem that the main problem for any adaptor would be how to simplify and/or make sense of adult concerns as they are dramatized in Shakespeare's plays. This is obviously true, but in order to offer children and Young Adults the experience of reading Shakespeare in a safe and entertaining form, authors do not always cut or simplify. They also include different kinds of supplementary and extra-textual information in their versions: a description of the context, explanations for the characters' behaviours, and causal links. In some cases they even trace and recreate the character's "past", his or her teenage experiences, with which readers may (or may not) identify. A number of narrative versions of Shakespeare's plays for the young fill in the gaps: they describe events that *must have* happened off stage, in the mysterious speculative world that precedes or follows the performance, but of which there is no trace in the play. It is in the nature of narrative retelling to supply extra information: the most creative retellings of Shakespeare are, in a way, nothing but recreations of several imagined off-scenes added to the original plot of the play (see Tosi 2016a). This is the stuff of fan fiction, the desire to explore and expand the "as ifs" of literature:

Two of the basic premises of fan fiction are the beliefs that (a) fictional characters and universes can transcend both their original context and their creator and (b) the said creator cannot claim to know everything about them. (Pugh 2005: 222)

However, long before the establishment of fanfiction web sites, the desire to push the boundaries of canonical story and character, transcend textual restrictions and supplement Shakespeare's stories with creative material for the young, was felt and satisfied by Mary Cowden Clarke (1809-1898), who, in the century of character criticism, developed a way to refashion Shakespeare's female characters as if they were idealized models of real human beings with which Victorian girl readers could identify. Speculating on the heroines' past lives, supplying motivations according to the logic of realism that was characteristic of the novel, and releasing female characters from their pre-destined theatrical spaces, was the point of departure for narrative journeys such as her *Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (1850-1), a collection of 15 novellas that "reconstruct" the childhood and teenage years of a number of Shakespeare's female characters. These prequels place female characters firmly at the centre of the stories, and create new characters who act as sites of projection for different constructions of femininity. Despite their different historical contexts, both Cowden Clarke's retellings of Shakespeare's plays and a number of contemporary novels based on Shakespeare's



plays choose to focus on female characters in the plays, and investigate the impact of (formal, emotional, religious) education, or lack of it, received by the heroines in their fictional past. As is known, feminist criticism in the last decades has focussed critical attention onto Shakespeare's female characters, exploring in a more theoretically nuanced way constructions of gender identity in early modern England – but since the nineteenth century Shakespeare's female characters have always acted as sites of projection as well as negotiation, for different constructions of femininity. Cowden Clarke's heroines often appear remarkably more Victorian than early modern, in the same way as some female characters in contemporary novels for teenagers appear to resemble today's adolescents. Cowden Clarke and several contemporary novels for teenagers address primarily a female audience.

We can roughly identify two kinds of narrative retellings of Shakespeare's plays for the young:

- 1) those by the Lambs, their Victorian followers, such authors as Leon Garfield and other contemporary authors who rely on the structure of the short story collection. They include very little creative material and can be considered primarily as reductions or abridgements, and
- 2) those by Cowden Clarke and a number YA novels which expand Shakespeare's plots by providing extra information, are highly creative, and rework the original plays by adding prequels, sequels, new characters and so on.

The Goodreads website (accessed 31 January 2017) lists 105 Young Adult novels (a genre specifically written and marketed for adolescents or young people emerging as adults) based on Shakespeare. This list includes novels that only allude to Shakespeare's plays, novels that loosely borrow Shakespearean plots but rely on a different chronotope, vampire/zombie novels with Shakespeare's characters, contemporary novels that show a staging of a Shakespeare play by young people, mangas, fanciful reconstructions of Shakespeare's biography in which the Bard plays the part of a romantic hero, time-travel fantasies where a boy or a girl is magically catapulted into the early modern period, and so on. Actually, both Clarke's tales and the contemporary retellings of Shakespeare that I am going to examine in this essay can be considered appropriations rather than adaptations – my working definition of appropriation being that provided by Julie Sanders:

Appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain. This may or may not involve a generic shift, and it may still require the intellectual juxtaposition of (at least) one text against another that we have suggested is central to the reading and spectating experience of adaptations. (1999:26)

This new product is at the point of intersection between Shakespeare representing high culture and education, and youth culture and marketing (Hulbert,



Wetmore and York 2006: 1) – obviously one of the purposes of these novels, whose readers include students in secondary schools in Anglophone countries, is that of making Shakespeare more relevant and meaningful to the experience of today's teenagers, who may associate Shakespeare with linguistic difficulty or the pressure of examinations. But, although romance and adventure are central components, these novels, as Sanders suggests when referring to appropriation, still require the intellectual juxtaposition of one text against another, and of (at least) one character against another, on the part of the reader. In Osborne's words, "Young Adult novelists simultaneously echo and outdo Cowden Clarke in the complex array of Shakespeare's characters that intrigue them" (2015: 23).

A general tendency is that of revaluing a minor or marginal or negative character. Genette defines revaluation of a character as "a pragmatic or psychological transformation – with a more 'attractive' role in the value system of the hypertext than was the case in the hypotext" (1997: 343). The most obvious way in which these retellings undermine the frame that attributes evil intentions to the villain figure is to provide him or her with a story, that is, with a past. This move turns the villain into a more individualized character with whom an emotional engagement is much more probable, especially in the cases in which the past centres on trauma and evil is presented as a matter of survival (see Bruner 691-710): the prequel provides retrospective knowledge of what caused the villain to become the villain. It is the case, for example, of Lady Macbeth in Lisa Klein's *Lady Macbeth's Daughter* (2009) or the witch Sycorax in Grace Tiffany's *Ariel* (2005), a prequel to *The Tempest* focalized through the eponymous spirit. In *Ariel* the callousness of the aerial spirit (gendered female) on the island is more deserving of blame than Sycorax's: Ariel first refuses to come to the aid of the poor destitute pregnant Sycorax during a very difficult delivery, and then persuades Caliban to kill his mother.

The category of YA novels based on Shakespeare that is most relevant for my analysis includes novels that are recognizably based on one Shakespeare play, structured on the same plot, and with (roughly) the same characters as the original play. Set in medieval or early modern periods, these narrations tend to expose the double standard between men's and women's sexual conduct and the strictures of the patriarchal world. Even if the characters generally speak in non-idiomatic standard English, Shakespeare's own words are occasionally summarized or intercalated in the rest of the narrative and some linguistic archaisms are retained, so that the dialogue may sound only remotely shakespearean but entirely comprehensible to a reader who is not yet able to read or enjoy early modern English.

Apart from the language, these novels are defined by massive use of addition and expansion devices: new characters and new incidents and episodes (including new endings, or added prequels and sequels) are interpolated into the familiar world of the plays. A trait shared by these texts is therefore narrative amplification, in the sense used by Genette (1997: 264): "amplification proceeds chiefly through diegetic development (that is the role of expansion: distension of details, descriptions, multiplication of episodes and secondary characters)". Characters that are only mentioned in Shakespeare's plays, as just names, become fully developed characters



in the novels (this is a strategy that we also find in Clarke's Victorian retellings), and are involved in alternative story lines which accompany or substitute the main one. Contemporary authors enlist a number of doubles (generally invented female characters), some as female helpers whose fate does not necessarily mirror that of the heroine. It is a narrative world of transtextual characters (Richardson 2010: 527-541), which challenges the persistence of an individual characterization in different texts. This is not a strategy that we only find in YA retellings: a large number of texts that have been rewritten from a postcolonial, postmodern, feminist perspective in recent decades have crafted characters that may have lost the original traits and gained new ones. After all, "portability", which is a typical attribute of literary characters (see Vermeule 2010: 49), is probably their most outstanding feature – one only needs to think of King Lear's daughters in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991), or, more recently, Hamlet as a narrating foetus in Ian McEwan's novel *Nutshell* (2016). For example, Lisa Fiedler's *Dating Hamlet* (2002) and Lisa Klein's *Ophelia* (2006), based on *Hamlet's* plot "radically deconstruct Ophelia's character traits that had been outlined by many nineteenth-century and even contemporary critics (see for example Bamber 1982: 77, 182): inadequacy, blind obedience, incapacity to react [...] are replaced by initiative, emotional and (physical) strength, resistance to the patriarchal world, and independence of mind" (Tosi 2013b: 20). Broadly speaking, Klein's and Fiedler's novels portray more powerful and less obedient Ophelias than the Shakespearean characters ("You cannot control me" Klein's Ophelia tells Laertes, 106). They provide prequels to the play, and insight about Ophelia's childhood and teenage years. Ophelia, a survivor, is given a voice and perspective on the events at Elsinore. Both novels focus on the love story of Ophelia and Hamlet and its aftermath – they bring onstage the courting period which in Shakespeare's play is offstage, so the romance is expanded. The novels also explore extensively the metaphor of acting: Ophelia is as skillful an actor as Hamlet as in both novels she only pretends to be mad and stages her own fake death (she can swim) very efficiently (see Tosi 2013b). Klein and Fiedler construct different Ophelias, who move in the Shakespearean milieu with new awareness and try to change its ending by evading the prison of their theatrically predetermined role. The implication is that the Shakespearean Ophelia is a "difficult" character for contemporary girls to identify with – while the new empowered self-confident Ophelia at the centre of YA narratives can be a "better" role model for girl readers.

In other YA novels, invented characters act as focalizers and provide an external point of view on the events of the play. Miriam Pressler's *Shylock's Daughter* (1999), which gives a powerful depiction of sixteenth-century Venice and the resident Jewish community in the Ghetto, is built on the alternation of third-person narration and the voice of the ugly orphan Dalilah, who has lived as a companion and a servant to Jessica since she was a little girl. Through Dalilah's eyes we see Jessica's love for extravagance and her restlessness in having to obey her father's rules as well as those that regulate the Jewish presence in Venice (Tosi 2013b). In Lisa Klein's *Lady Macbeth's Daughter* (2009) one of the narrators is Albia, the invented teenage daughter of Lady Macbeth who has been abandoned in the woods because she is female and a cripple, and has been raised by the weird sisters. With her gift of second sight, she becomes



the fourth witch when she evokes the apparitions before Macbeth. Her fate is inextricably entangled with that of her parents, but at the same time she develops romantic feelings for Fleance and she is interpolated into the Scottish dynasty. What is remarkable in this version is the juxtaposition between Albia's narration and that of Grelach, as the future Lady Macbeth is named, a tragic character with whom the teenage reader may find it more difficult to identify, but who supplements Albia's story with a prequel that appears to motivate, if not justify, her cruelty in the play (such as her arranged marriage, the several miscarriages, and the way violent men, including Macbeth, control her life). The two different viewpoints, that of mother and daughter, alternate in the novel, until the final scene of anagnorisis in the battlefield, when Albia refuses to slay her own father and withdraws from the fight (see Tosi 2013a).

YA novels based on Shakespeare tend to project modern constructions of teenage female identity onto the "original character" as they transfer it into a new fictional world. Cognitive theories of literary characters in novels argue that literary characters have a double nature: "on the one hand, they are based on real-life experiences with living persons; on the other, they are the result of processes of literary construction" (Schneider 2001: 605). As the character of a "Shakespeare teenager" is transferred from the pre-fixed role of the play into that of a novel, readers are implicitly invited to make connections between the character and their real-life experiences of the teenage world. "Young Adult fiction", as has been noted,

generally concerns itself at some level with questions of identity. [...] The fact that its fictional worlds are focalized through adolescent eyes similarly predisposes YA fiction to represent reality in terms of crises, breaks, rapid transitions and sudden epiphanies. (Falconer 2010: 91)

Questions of identity at times of crises are precisely what characterize many retellings of Shakespeare that stage teenagers as protagonists.

The characters that have inspired more YA retellings for a female audience are Juliet and Ophelia, and *Romeo and Juliet* is possibly the most popular choice, probably because the adaptor can rely on a general cultural awareness of the play as an archetypal and "universal" love story, with which the young reader may already be familiar in some form. It is a play with teenage protagonists, and as such it would appear to have immediate relevance to a young audience although adaptors may find issues like suicide and condemnation of parental authority difficult to present to a young audience. For example, in the collection of essays *Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics* (1993) the chapter on *Romeo and Juliet* mentions a number of Young Adult Novels that deal with teenage suicide – a reading list that should help introduce teenagers to the play. The author of the chapter remarks: "the themes are as current as they were in Shakespeare's time: parent-child conflict, teenage love, friendship and peer pressure, and suicide" (Reed 1993: 93). In the manner adolescents are represented and are seen to claim a right to take responsibility for their choices in a city controlled by two feuding families, these novels are revealing of changing notions of the family and an imbalance of power within it – all the while providing a mediated



and safe version of the play which would ultimately have educational value (Tosi 2016b).

A number of contemporary Young Adult novels based on *Romeo and Juliet* emphasize the comedy element. It is as if the generic instability that has been detected in the play (see for example Snyder 1970 and Rozett 1985), could be resolved by having the plot avoid the shift into tragedy after the first half of the play and continue, consistently, into the romantic comedy mode, at least as far as the "alternative" love plot of Rosaline and Benvolio is concerned.

Among the several retellings of *Romeo and Juliet*, I would like to focus on three novels which, interestingly, replace the star-crossed lovers with a couple of minor characters, Benvolio and Rosaline: Lisa Fiedler's *Romeo's Ex. Rosaline's Story* (2006), Melinda Traub's *Still Star Crossed* (2013) and Rachel Caine's *Prince of Shadows* (2014).

In Shakespeare's play Benvolio, a Montague and Romeo's cousin, is, as his name suggests, a peacekeeper (the Capulet Tybalt is his foil), who on several occasions tries to dissuade Mercutio from fighting:

I pray thee, good Mercutio, let's retire;  
The day is hot, the Capels are abroad,  
An if we meet we shall not scape a brawl,  
For now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring. (3.1.1-5)

He is the recipient of Romeo's love sickness for Rosaline and suggests going to the Capulets' party to distract Romeo. He disappears from the play after having explained to the Prince what happened in the street fight in which Mercutio and Tybalt are murdered (act 3, scene 1). As for Rosaline, she is only mentioned in Shakespeare's play as the object of Romeo's infatuation; he describes her to Benvolio as someone who does not return his love because she has promised to remain chaste:

She'll not be hit  
With Cupid's arrow. She hath Diana's wit,  
And in strong proof of chastity well armed  
From love's weak childish bow she lives uncharmed.  
She will not stay the siege of loving terms,  
Nor bide th'encounter of assailing eyes,  
Not ope her lap to saint-seducing gold.  
O, she is rich in beauty, only poor  
That when she dies, her beauty dies her store.  
[...]  
She is too fair, too wise, wisely too fair,  
To merit bliss by making me despair, (1.1.206-214, 219-220)

Critics tend to compare the infatuation that Romeo feels for Rosaline with the deeper feeling he experiences for Juliet – as soon as Juliet makes her first appearance, Rosaline disappears from Romeo's mind (as well as from the spectators' or readers' awareness).



But the question is: why choose Rosaline and Benvolio to replace Romeo and Juliet? Obviously these characters can be paired to reproduce the plot line of the star-crossed lovers of rival families (Rosaline is Juliet's cousin and a Capulet, Benvolio is a Montague), but with a non-tragic ending. Benvolio is the voice of common sense in the play; Rosaline is portrayed as infinitely less passionate and impetuous than her cousin: both (at least in theory) have potential for dealing more rationally and efficiently with the obstacles that the family feud has put in their path to marital happiness. It appears that Romeo and Juliet are perceived as problematic characters for the average teenage reader and badly in need of "improvement" or even help (as in Susanne Selfors's *Saving Juliet* (2008), in which a couple of contemporary teenagers are magically sent from Broadway to Shakespeare's Verona to solve Romeo and Juliet's problems). In a way this is a form of literary schizophrenia – teenagers are supposed to appreciate this tragedy because they can more easily identify with the protagonists but at the same time they are literally flooded with retold versions that refashion the characters, or replace them with others, because the originals appear to be too "dangerous".

Lisa Fiedler's *Romeo's Ex* presents the story mainly through the eyes of Rosaline, although her narration is occasionally interspersed with shorter chapters by Benvolio, Romeo, Mercutio and Tybalt. As in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* (1966) the title characters watch *Hamlet's* main characters enact fragments of the original scenes, in *Romeo's Ex* the events of the main plot are witnessed and commented upon mainly by Rosaline. We watch the familiar story of *Romeo and Juliet* unfold through the practical and judicious perspective of a character almost entirely invented but which provides a remarkably acceptable "other" to Juliet – in this novel as in many other YA versions of this play, Juliet emerges very clearly as an *anti-model* for the young girl reader of today. When Juliet, after Romeo has been banished, confides to Rosaline her suicidal intentions, her wiser cousin advises her to confess the truth about the secret marriage:

"Shame on thee, Juliet, Shame! What you describe is not power; nay, 'tis the very opposite of power. It is weakness and stupidity and indolence and defeat. Mark me, cousin, there is nothing mighty in quitting life. The only victory is summoning the audacity to stay. If you truly wish to exert power in the face of your father's cruelty, there is only one thing for you to do."

"And what is that?" she asks.

"Live. No daggers, no potions. Live and tell your lord that you cannot marry for you have already married." (Fiedler 2006: 195)

As in Stoppard's play, what is offstage (Rosaline's encounters with Romeo, for example) becomes the main action, while the Romeo and Juliet plot proceeds, in the background, to its predetermined Shakespearean ending, but with a twist. Rosaline joins Romeo and Juliet in the Capulet family vault after both have attempted to take their lives. She detects that Romeo is not dead, gives him a powerful antidote and saves his life. In the (crowded, it seems) vault she even asks Benvolio to help her try





and perform a heart transplant from the dying Tybalt into Juliet's body, but desists when she realises that there is nothing she can do for her unfortunate cousin. Romeo escapes death, but not Rosaline's rage who vents her frustration at him for the irrationality of teenage love and suicide:

"Your recklessness, yours and Juliet's, was an affront to true devotion, your irreverence dishonored love. You met and admired one another and impiously called it love. 'Twas quick and bright and dangerous and magical. But you did not *think*. You settled for desire, but did not allow time for love." (226)

The couple that the reader is supposed to admire, unsurprisingly, is that of Rosaline and Benvolio, although Rosaline falls for Mercutio first, and even climbs his balcony to tell him her love, only to be rejected and ridiculed (so in a way, she mirrors Romeo's own path from infatuation to love). The two youths come from the same feuding households, but the novel allows them more time than the play to get to know each other. Rosaline is an early modern version of a career woman: she refuses Benvolio's marriage proposal – and this is where more anachronisms intrude in the plot – in order to answer her calling and study medicine at the university of Padua. Four years later (in 1599) and without a formal degree ("I fear 'twill be decades before the university, enlightened as it is, will have the courage to bestow a degree upon a lady", 245) she returns to a pacified Verona and to Benvolio who has been waiting for her all along. In *Romeo's Ex Benvolio*, even if he is endowed with more narrative space than in the play, tends to remain in the Shakespearean cast of the benevolent and easy going friend and lover (he is in love with Rosaline from the very beginning). In contrast, Rosaline initially plays the part of confidante and friend to Juliet but later moves on to a different path of scholar and wise woman (see Tosi 2016b).

This novel engages playfully with the Shakespearian intertext and borrows motives from other Shakespearean plays: for example, Rosaline is escorted to Padua by none other than Petruchio and Grumio (from *The Taming of the Shrew*) and Benvolio befriends a couple of orphan twins called Viola and Sebastian (from *Twelfth Night*) and rescues them from poverty. This is a typical feature of YA novels based on Shakespeare: when this happens, the reader is alerted to possible collisions between the dramatic worlds of different plays. This may produce a form of intertextual surprise (or an "ontological scandal", in the words of McHale 1989: 85) which derives from the quite unexpected discovery of a breach in the seams that divide one self-contained dramatic world from another.

Two YA versions of *Romeo and Juliet* have placed Benvolio more firmly at the centre of the romance plot, as an adventurous romantic hero who is not shy of fighting: Rosaline and Benvolio are allied and try to stop the carnage caused by the feud. Traub's *Still Star Crossed* provides a narrative sequel to the play, following the aftermath of the lovers' tragic deaths. The first few pages are focalized through Prince Escalus and his frustration at the situation – although he has induced the houses of Montague and Capulet to raise statues in memories of the unhappy lovers, they are still fighting. Everybody feels guilty, especially the Friar and Rosaline, Juliet's poor



relation, who wishes she had accepted Romeo – she believes that if she had, both he and her cousin Juliet might still be alive. The first part investigates and explains the characters' reactions to the deaths of Romeo and Juliet, but soon the rhythm quickens as a mysterious hooded figure keeps stirring the feud by trying to put the blame on members of both families for murder and violence against the other. Prince Escalus's solution is to order Rosaline and Benvolio to get married, and use marriage to pacify the families. The plot thickens: the mysterious hooded figure turns out to be no less than Lady Capulet bent on revenge; Paris, who is not dead, raises an army against Prince Escalus because he wants to take his place; and Benvolio and Rosaline follow the typical romance plot of the pair who argue and despise each other at first, only to fall in love madly later. There is lots of adventure and action, but the focus is on the way the relationship between Rosaline and Benvolio unfolds: once again, like Romeo and Juliet, two young people are embroiled on opposite sides of a long-standing conflict. Rosaline is clever and independent, and in the course of the play she changes her mind about becoming a nun (both Prince Escalus and Benvolio propose to her – an intriguing love triangle).

The readers' responses to the novel published in the Goodreads website are extremely revealing of the way the expanded character of Rosaline resonates in young female readers. The degree of emphatic alignment with the "refashioned" character of Rosaline in these comments is remarkable: one reader writes "she is honestly the kind of person I want to be. She's strong, willful, not afraid to speak her mind even in a time period where women supposedly don't have one, self reliant, and knows what she wants and how she intends to get it". Another reader states that she prefers the narrative version to the play: "I am not at all a fan of *Romeo and Juliet*. If you'd let me, I could go on a huge, never ending rant about everything that's wrong with it and just how much I can't stand that play. I'm a lot more open to R&J retellings [...], but I try to stay as far away from Shakespeare's story as I can so I was pleasantly surprised to find myself interested in this story".<sup>1</sup>

Caine's *Prince of Shadows* is the only YA narrative retelling of the play that has Benvolio as a focalizer and narrator – he is a well-rounded character: mature, aware of his position in the house of Montague and kind and responsible towards his friends Romeo and Mercutio. He is a Robin Hood figure (a thief known as "The Prince of Shadows") who steals from the rich and takes revenge on the arrogant – part of the plot revolves around his adventures and the brawls he is involved in (he is less of a peacekeeper than the Shakespeare character); all the while trying to keep an eye on his foolish cousin Romeo and fight the curse that Mercutio has called on the lovers of Verona after his own tragic death. In the novel Mercutio is gay, and in early modern Verona his homosexuality is considered a serious crime. When he and his lover are discovered, he is heavily punished and his lover is sentenced to death; the only possibility to please his cruel father is to accept an arranged marriage, which will bring him misery and insanity. Despite the efforts of Benvolio the Prince of Thieves, the feud

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<sup>1</sup> <<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/16085488-still-star-crossed>> (31 January 2017).



cannot be stopped and the Romeo and Juliet plot, which unravels backstage, proceeds, inexorably, towards its tragic conclusion.

Even if the emphasis is on scandals, betrayals, curses, duels, and revenge (“measure for measure” is the characters’ catchphrase), the novel describes very effectively a world that operates according to violence, and family politics that crush individuality, the younger generations, and women. Benvolio is extremely sympathetic with women’s lot, especially Rosaline’s, who is beaten up by her brother Tybalt regularly – a victim to the patriarchal world of the Capulets. Benvolio’s enlightened perspective allows the reader to enter the world of early modern women in Verona, their dependence on their husbands, as in this description of Lady Montague, who

stood obediently to leave with him; it was her place to go, whether she was hungry or not, sated or not. I wondered whether she had been so content with that lot, so biddable. Surely not. Surely once, she had been young and afire with her own potential. Even girls dreamed of what they might do, did they not? I had no idea what they dreamed about, but I did not think it was a lifetime of being ordered, of walking behind, or enduring whatever was allotted to them without complaint. (Caine 2014: 126)

Eventually Rosaline and Benvolio manage to lift the curse: it is too late for Romeo and Juliet, but not for them. Before the happy ending with marriage celebrated by Prince Escalus, however, Rosaline explains to a baffled Benvolio, who believes that women at home, at least, can be safe, that it is at home with their families that they are most vulnerable:

Safe? You know nothing about us, Benvolio Montague. We live our lives in terror, not in safety – terror of our fathers, who may beat or kill us with any reason or none at all...Terror of the men we will wed, having scarce set eyes upon them before that moment and yet expected to submit to all they ask... terror of other women whispering rumors that destroy us, with no defenses possible. You have swords to defend your honor. We have nothing. (Caine 2014: 319)

To conclude. By exploring motivation, establishing new links between the characters, and having narrators pass authoritative moral judgements, all these texts negotiate with well-established critical interpretations of the central characters, often challenging and channeling them into unexpected critical directions. Although YA versions of *Romeo and Juliet* cannot help being loaded with the baggage of the tragedy’s associations, the young readers of today (especially female) may be captured by the power of narrative fiction – in the same way, we might imagine, in which Shakespeare was captured by novellas about the story of the two lovers from Verona. The creative retellings that I have examined do not “meddle” with the original characters and do not alter the original plot of *Romeo and Juliet* in any significant way, but Rosaline and Benvolio are given center stage as narrative voice which open up new narrative possibilities. They end up playing a different and a bigger part than in the original play, but firmly refuse that of the victim to the old generation’s decisions



and actions. Rosaline's narrative of survival in particular is in contrast with that of Juliet in the fashioning of an empowered character that challenges, transgresses and updates gender codes.

Narrative amplification, which in the Young Adult novels adds a creative impulse to the narrative reconfiguration of the play, implicitly invites young readers to identify and ponder on the differences, and occasional similarities, in the growing up crises of early modern or medieval teenagers and today's adolescents. These retellings do not "fix" or change the traits of the original characters (who may be considered unsuitable as role models), but bring in new characters as mediators, and expand existing secondary characters in order to make *them* fit into contemporary notions of teenage role models. In the absence of suitable family education, and in a patriarchal context which does not allow much freedom to the younger generations, characters like Rosaline and Benvolio educate themselves, thus refashioning gender identities that can be resilient and rebellious, but also, remodelled to better suit a contemporary idea of how a teenager should behave. The new romantic pair, unlike the original Shakespearian lovers, are given a second chance.

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