

Adolescents and Family Crises in Victorian vs Contemporary Prose Versions of *Romeo and Juliet* for a Female Audience

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Abstract The article is concerned with the female readership of Shakespeare's plays and the way abridgements, adaptations, and appropriations have mediated and still mediate the cultural relationship that girls or young women establish with the Bard. The analysis concentrates on the relationships between generations, and the way narrators focus and comment on the family crisis originated in the play. By exploring motivation, establishing new links between the characters, and having narrators pass authoritative moral judgements, all these texts negotiate with well-established interpretations of the play, often challenging and channelling them into unexpected critical directions. Although narrative versions of *Romeo and Juliet* can't help being loaded with the baggage of the tragedy's associations, the female young reader 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. In addition, narrative amplification in the young adult novels adds a creative impulse to the narrative reconfiguration of the play, implicitly inviting girl readers to reflect on the differences, and occasional similarities, in the growing up crises of early modern or medieval teenagers and today's adolescents.

Keywords Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*. Children literature. Female readership. Teenagers. Adolescents.

Ever since the Lambs' *Tales* (1807), young female audiences have always been an essential part of the history of children's adaptations of Shakespeare. In the "Preface" to the *Lambs' Tales from Shakespeare* (2007, 3) we read that the intention was to "make these tales easy reading for very young children". Immediately after, though, the author of the "Preface" (presumably Mary who, because of her lack of formal education, may have been sensitive to the issue of giving girls the chance to read Shakespeare), added that

For young ladies too it has been my intention chiefly to write, because boys are generally permitted the use of their fathers' libraries at a much earlier age than girls are, they frequently having the best scenes of Shakespeare by heart, before their sisters are permitted to look into this manly book. (4)

In the second edition of the *Tales*, an "Advertisement" identifies a narrower readership than the 1807 edition:

The Proprietors of this work willingly pay obedience to the voice of the public. It has been the general sentiment, that the style in which these tales were written, is not so precisely adapted for the amusement of mere children, as for an acceptable and improving present to young ladies advancing to the state of womanhood. They therefore offer to the public an edition prepared with suitable elegance. They are satisfied that every reader of taste will thank them for not suppressing the former Preface, though not exactly applicable on the present occasion (Lamb 2009, iii).

This edition clearly posits the original reference to young children as no longer applicable. A relationship between prose adaptations of Shakespeare and girls is therefore established very early, and is crucial in the construction of a Shakespearean canon for children.

The history of adaptations of Shakespeare's plays for a young audience has been for the greatest part of two centuries a tale of drama turned into prose narrative, with the same 'story' abridged, distilled, or expanded, into the different 'plots' (cf. Marchitello 2003) of the single adaptations.¹ The process of transposing a mimetic mode into a diegetic mode has a powerful impact on time-place coordinates, character and setting presentation as well as perspective. An omniscient narrator is introduced, who generally simplifies complex issues for the young reader and intrudes with comments and interpretations. With children's prose versions added explanations and attempts at ideological reorientations of the plays in educational terms are all the more significant as in most cases the adaptation is accessed *before* the source is read or experienced at the theatre (which may be interpreted as a challenge to the notion of priority or authority of the 'original', Hutcheon 2006, xiii). This is particularly relevant in the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, as 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 way. This is also a play with teenage protagonists, so it would appear to have immediate relevance to a young audience although adaptors may find issues like suicide and ambivalence towards parental authority difficult to present to children. For example, in the collection of essays *Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics* (1993) the chapter on *Romeo and Juliet* lists a number of Young Adult Novels dealing with teenage suicide or peer pressure that should

1 "Novels for children and Young Adults are the most likely to rework the plot of a Shakespearean play or even just to rewrite the entire plot as prose" (Castaldo 2007, 409).

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). On the contrary, a survey of a number of children's versions of *Romeo and Juliet* in prose, from the first narrative renditions of the play in English, by Charles Lamb (1807) to contemporary versions, reveals that these narratives offer quite different angles from which to look at family politics and gender representations as central themes which resonate differently in different ages.

While Shakespeare's theatrical text can keep all interpretive choices open, narrative versions for children need to narrow the spectrum of interpretations, changing a dialogical theatrical form into a linear monological narrative. I am going to concentrate on the relationships between generations, and the way narrators focus and comment on the family crisis originated in the play. In the manner adolescents are represented and are seen to claim a right to a private space in the civic space occupied by the two feuding families, these adaptations are revealing of *their* notions of the family and the way adolescents defy contemporary morality - all the while providing a mediated, safe and often abridged version of the play which would ultimately have educational value for a female readership.

In Lamb's *Tales* omitting the Histories and the Roman plays may have been justified by the slight interest ladies were believed to take in battles and history: as has been noted, "love is the one element of the plot which is never abridged" (Marsden 1989, 52) and its centrality in the *Tales* is further emphasised by the concentration on a single story-line. However, although *Romeo and Juliet* is a play about young love and the way love may not be a central factor in marriage, especially when it is the parents who choose a partner for their offspring, Lamb's version tends to be less conventionally romantic than later versions (cf. Bottoms 2000, 19) and less willing to reproduce the ideology of romantic love (cf. Callaghan 1994). Romeo is introduced as "a sincere and passionate lover, and one that lost his sleep for love" (Lamb & Lamb 2007, 210) long before he meets Juliet, and when they do meet and then separate after the balcony scene, the narrator glosses that "she had been smitten with the same hasty and inconsiderate passion for Romeo, which he had conceived for her" (212). The narrator goes to great pains to justify Juliet's confession of love:

She, unconscious of being overheard, and full of the new passion which that night's adventure called upon her lover by name (whom she supposed absent) [...] The lady continued her passionate discourse with herself (as she thought). (212-3)

When she realises that Romeo has been there all along, "a crimson blush came over Juliet's face [...] she would fain have recalled her words, but

that was impossible" (213). The narrator then reassures its readers that "nothing was further from his thoughts [Romeo's] than to impute a shadow of dishonour to such an honoured lady" (214). As it should be expected, the nurse puts in only a brief appearance. The Lambs were the first of many generations of adapters to cut subplots, minor characters as well as bawdy talk and double-entendres. Lord Capulet's choice of Paris is represented as sensible: "The husband he had chosen for her, not dreaming that she was married already, a gallant, young and noble gentleman, no unworthy suitor to the young Juliet, if she had never seen Romeo" (219).

As often happens in Lambs' *Tales*, characters are described through a narrow range of descriptive terms that work as labels which clarify for the reader their moral traits. For example, the friar is invariably referred to as "the holy man" (215) or "this good friar" (215, 218, 219) and once as "the friendly friar" (220). Consistently with this unambiguous characterization, at the end of the tale the friar is cleared "from any hand he could be supposed to have had in these complicated slaughters" (225). Descriptors are also used to divide characters along age lines: on one side Romeo, the young Montague, who "had never thoroughly entered into the family quarrel, being by nature wise and gentle" (116), "young Juliet" (220) and the "young count Paris" (220, 223), and on the other side, the parents, led by "the old lord Capulet" (219) whose reaction to Juliet's decision to marry Paris (she, "modestly dissembling, promised to become his bride", 220) is rejuvenation: "It seemed to put youth into the old man" (220). After the marriage, Juliet is referred to as Romeo's "dear lady" (218, 222) or "dear wife" (219), and he becomes "her dear husband" (220), as if the marriage had in some way removed them from the 'young' category, and upgraded them to a more defined, acceptable and mature position in the social hierarchy of the play. Lamb is also more sympathetic to the parents than later adapters. For example, when Juliet refuses to marry Paris, Lord Capulet

was deaf to all her excuses, and in a peremptory manner ordered her to get ready, for by the following Thursday she should be married to Paris: and having found her a husband rich, young and noble, such as the proudest maid in Verona might joyfully accept, he could not bear that out of an affected coyness, as he construed her denial, she should oppose obstacles to her own good fortune. (220)

When Juliet changes her mind following the friar's advice, "Juliet, who had displeased him exceedingly by her refusal of the count, was his darling again" (220-1). And when they believe Juliet is dead,

still more piteous it was to hear the mournings of the old lord and lady Capulet who having but this one, one poor loving child to rejoice and solace in, cruel death had snatched her from their sight, just as these care-

ful parents were on the point of seeing her advanced (as they thought) by a promising and advantageous match. (211)

Although in the end the parents' responsibility for the feud is not underplayed ("so did these poor old lords, when it was too late, strive to outgo each other in mutual courtesies", 226) there is a touch of compassion for these unfortunate parents (Capulet is not portrayed as an abusing father) who in the domestic sphere appear well-meaning in the way they conform to the rules and duties of a patriarchal society, like arranging a marriage. They don't seem to fail so much as parents, but as heads of families that have created the civic crisis in Verona by putting their private quarrels before the common good, even though this is precisely what brings about domestic tragedy.²

In the second half of the nineteenth century women studied and popularized Shakespeare's plays through children's and adults' editions, actresses' memoirs (the fame such performers as Ellen Terry or Helen Faucit were enjoying at the time celebrated what was perceived as a strong connection between Victorian womanhood and Shakespeare's female characters), critical articles in journals, and the establishment of reading groups for women. As Prince (2008, 79) has argued, "Victorian women had their choice of a wide variety of modes for experiencing Shakespeare". Gail Marshall (2009) in her *Shakespeare and Victorian Women* has analysed the way Victorian women were interested in discussing the nature of Shakespeare's hold over them and the necessity of his cultural inheritance - as if the difference and the distance between Shakespeare and the Victorians were recognized and then suspended, and the Bard, mediated and explained, could indeed instruct Victorian girls in how best to be feminine (or 'womanly', a favourite adjective of the period). The hugely popular *Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical and Historical* (1832) by Anna Jameson³ was one of the pioneering works in establishing a tradition of female character criticism in the nineteenth century. As Julie Hankey notes, "After Jameson it became commonplace to describe Shakespeare as the 'champion' of women" (1994, 427). Along the same lines, Cowden Clarke writes in her essay "Shakespeare as the Girl's Friend":

Her sex is set before her, limned with the utmost fidelity, painted in genuinest colors, for her to study and copy from or vary from, in accordance with what she feels and learns to be supremest harmonious effect in self-amelioration of character. (1887, 355)

2 See also Chapter 4, "The Family: Behaviour, Convention, Social Agreement and Their Breakdown", in Hunter & Lichtenfels 2009.

3 For an introduction to Anna Jameson and her contribution to character criticism, cf. Slights 1993.

Female critics of Shakespeare developed ways to discuss Shakespeare's female characters as if they were idealized models of real human beings with which girl readers could identify.⁴ For most of the nineteenth and twentieth century heroines acted as sites of projection for different constructions of femininity. Speculating on the heroines' past or future lives, supplying motivations according to the logic of realism that was characteristic of the novel (Fleming 2000, 13), and releasing female characters from their pre-destined theatrical spaces was the point of departure for imaginative journeys such as those undertaken by Mary Cowden Clarke in *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (2009). But even Anna Jameson, who inserts Juliet in the category of "characters of passions and the imagination" and writes that "Juliet is love itself. The passion is her state of being, and out of it she has no existence" ([1832] 1858, 163), ultimately needs to imagine a past for her heroine, in which she is a rich heiress.

Cowden Clarke was one of the most remarkable female scholars of Shakespeare and already had an established career as editor and philologist when she published her collection of 15 novellas which reconstruct the childhood and teenage years of a number of Shakespeare's female characters. Clarke's prequels can be considered appropriations rather than adaptations – my working definition of appropriation being that provided by Julie Sanders.⁵ However, *unlike* the Lambs' *Tales* and most Victorian/Edwardian children's Shakespeares, Cowden Clarke's novellas are defined by narrative amplification: new characters and new incidents and episodes are interpolated into the familiar world of the plays. A typical trait of Clarke's novellas is the addition of female "doubles" who provide a mirror to the heroines' experiences.

Mothers are the co-protagonists of many novellas of Clarke's collection where the reader can see the formative (both for good and bad) influence of mothers at work and ponder on the way this relationship affects the behaviour of the heroine. We should not forget that these tales were suitable for family reading: mothers were also the recipients of these tales (in their own very peculiar way, these tales can be considered an early example of Crossover fiction). The theme of education in these tales is central, as we follow in detail the heroines' emotional, intellectual and sentimental education (or lack of it – as in the case of Juliet). The heroines' future

4 "Long before a feminist sisterhood was born in the 1960s, nineteenth-century women writers appealed to an audience of fellow women among whom they expected to find sympathetic readers" (Ziegler, Dolan & Roberts 1997, 19).

5 "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" (Sanders 2006, 26).

choices appear to be determined primarily by the kind of family environment they were born in, by what they learned (or rather, by what they didn't learn) first from their mothers and then from their masters, friends, nurses and mentors. Cowden Clarke's "Juliet: the White Dove of Verona" concentrates mainly on the love education of Juliet's mother, Angelica, who is married as a teenager to the shallow and gallant Lord Capulet, an old friend of her father's. Angelica falls in love with her husband almost immediately but her insecurity prevents the couple from reaching happiness and mutual understanding for many years. Lord Capulet is described as a "good-humoured voluptuary [...] full of lively gossip, proficient in all the scandal of the day, versed in all the talk, the practice, the intrigue, of society" (2009, 349) whose life has been "a mere pursuit of pleasure". Angelica's jealousy, which she hides from her husband behind a cold exterior behaviour, is misplaced. Giacinta, the first lady she believes her husband has fallen in love with, dies unexpectedly and Lady Capulet, at the funeral, witnesses the suicide of a young man, falling on her corpse. The couple were secretly betrothed:

His corpse was laid beside hers on the bier; the chanting of the dirge was resumed; the funereal ceremonies proceeded; Giacinta and her betrothed were borne together to one tomb, and side by side rested in death. (372)

This is in effect an Italianate novella which owes a lot to revenge tragedy motifs. In this anticipation of the unhappy fate of the star-crossed lovers, as well as in other incidents, much is made of poison. The next lady Juliet's mother is jealous of, is her husband's ward Leonilda: first she poisons a pair of gloves that her husband was going to give Leonilda as a gift (she is brought to her senses when she sees little Juliet playing with a similar pair), then she silently employs an assassin (here we are in a Radcliffian gothic world of banditti) to get rid of her - only much later it will be revealed that Leonilda has died of natural causes (but the assassin keeps blackmailing Lady Capulet until she gains this knowledge). When her husband does stray in the end, Lady Capulet is not capable of reading the signs and even befriends this high-class courtesan by the suggestive name of Virginia (who falls in love, eventually, with Mercutio, who cynically rejects her). Lady Capulet, neglected and feeling more and more insecure, even envisages taking a lover, but soon realizes that she is still much in love with her husband, and invites her admirer to find true love elsewhere. As has been noted, "What young Victorian mother, neglected as she might be by her lawful husband, could seriously contemplate taking a lover after reading Mrs Clarke's redundant but impressive message?" (Gross 1972, 50; cf. also Brown 2005). Most of the novella actually describes the way Angelica learns how to overcome her marriage crisis - she

can thus be considered an example of good wife (if not mother) behaviour. Prudence is the supreme virtue and happiness cannot be found outside marriage (this, at least, for ladies); this is the warning the narrator issues to the benefit of its female audience, composed of mothers and daughters. But what of Juliet? Only a few pages of this novella are devoted to Lady Capulet's daughter. Like Ophelia in the same collection, she spends the first few years of her life with the nurse, and we have a description of the earthquake that killed Susan, the nurse's little daughter mentioned in the play, and her husband. Clearly the lady Angelica is too engrossed in her own complicated marriage life to care for her daughter's education so, like other heroines, Juliet is left to her own devices and to a secluded life, the only people she associates with being her cousin Tybalt and the Friar:

For the lively questions that naturally sprang to her lips, learned to restrain themselves from utterance, when, through a course of years, they met with monosyllables, or short sentences spoken abstractedly, in reply. Gradually, her communion with both father and mother became almost entirely restricted to the wonted periodical salutes, exchanged between Italian parent and child, when she kissed, first their cheeks, and then their hands, on bidding them good-morning - after meal-time - and before retiring to rest. [...] The person whom Juliet held in chiefest reverence as her friend and counsellor, was her spiritual director [...] a certain holy man, called Friar Lawrence. With him she learned to perceive and partially to analyse the feelings, the impulses, the aspirations within her. With him she attained something of self-consciousness. (443-4)

But it is obvious that Juliet's education is far from being complete, especially as she "inherited a susceptible disposition from her father" and, from her mother, "a sensitive, passionate temperament" (444). It is as if Juliet were all nature and no culture, but a nature that is informed by "a natural affinity with the beautiful. [...] Her heart informed her mind. It might be said, that her feelings, rather than her understanding, thought" (445) (the intellectual of the family is her cousin Rosaline, who is her opposite in everything). As in Jameson's vision of Juliet as the embodiment of passion, Cowden Clarke's Juliet is "awaiting [...] the vital fire of Love, which was to make her, from a dreaming child into a sentient, passionate woman" (451). The narrator appears to have exhausted the moralistic and didactic intent in the depiction of Lady Capulet and the dangers a lady in a similar position may be exposed to - as the reader must already have learned her lessons by her example, Juliet can be described as someone in between states, blooming, and ready to be awakened to mature life by the events of *Romeo and Juliet* (Clarke's novellas end immediately before the heroines make their entrances into the plays).

It is clear that the Lambs' *Tales* and Cowden Clarke's *Girlhood* represent two remarkably different traditions. The "Lamb tradition" extending to writers such as Garfield or Birch, relies on the structure of the short story collection. Versions in this tradition can also be considered reductions or abridgements; they do not supplement Shakespeare's meanings with creative material and in general they are less likely to perform acts of radical cultural appropriation than expanded versions.

The *Tales* have enjoyed continual success since publication and many collections have reproduced their style and structure. Most were published in the late Victorian and Edwardian period, at the same time in which England was experiencing an unprecedented flowering of the literary fairy tale for children (see Zipes 1999). These versions on the whole tend to embrace the ideology of romantic love more decidedly than the Lamb's *Tales* (for example, there is invariably a fairy-tale element in the description of the ball at the Capulets' palace where Romeo and Juliet fall in love at first sight) although they often insert elements of comedy. For example, Adelaide Gordon Sim's *Phoebe's Shakespeare* (Phoebe was Sim's niece) (1894), makes the most of act 2, scene 5 in which the nurse is reluctant to tell Juliet about her meeting with Romeo (similarly, Hoffman's *The Children's Shakespeare* (1911) ridicules a lame nurse, while Sim's has rheumatism). But Sim is not ready to make allowances for Romeo's planned suicide: "he did a very wicked thing" when he went to the apothecary, remarks the narrator, "if only Romeo had been a little more patient and less selfish, and had remembered that he had no right to kill himself just because he was unhappy" (1894, 145-6). There is a general tendency to sympathise more with Juliet than with Romeo, who is often described as an immature and irrational youth. In Nesbit's version (1897) Romeo "wanted to love somebody, and as he hadn't seen the right lady, he was obliged to love the wrong one" [Rosaline] (Nesbit 2004, 10-1). In contrast, in Constance and Mary Maud's *Shakespeare's Stories* (1913, 44), Juliet is perceptive and intelligent, as well as beautiful and innocent, as she is described as "knowing her parent [her mother] far better than that they knew her [...]. Her mother [...] had brought her up well in spite of the spoiling of the nurse". In Mary MacLeod's *The Shakespeare Story Book* after the exchange of love vows, Juliet "could scarcely rejoice in the contract they had made; it seemed too rash, too unadvised, too sudden, to last" (1902, 142) while we see Romeo through the friar's perception:

he foresaw that one of Romeo's passionate, excitable nature was never likely to be happy; the hot-headed young man was always in extremes, either in a state of rapture or in the depths of despair. He would listen to no counsel, and never paused to reflect. (143)

In these versions, when the nurse is not a comical character, she unambiguously takes the parents' side and is portrayed as selfish – it is her insensitive behaviour that drives Juliet to despair as she feels deserted by *all* her loved ones. For example, in MacLeod the nurse is “good-natured after a fashion, but vulgar-minded, and very selfish if anything came to cross her own convenience. [...] When trouble arose, the nurse's shallow, selfish nature became apparent and poor Juliet was soon to learn that she must rely solely on her own strength and judgement in the sorrows that overwhelmed her” (147-8). In Thomas Carter's *Stories from Shakespeare* Juliet “could not have had a more unworthy comforter, for the nurse was an unscrupulous old woman, and her counsels were always of a selfish type” (1910, 250). In these revisions the lovers, especially Juliet, are alone against an unlucky fate – the occasional moments of comic relief (some of these versions have Romeo dressed up as a pilgrim at the party, which makes his courting metaphors appropriate) do not dispel a generally sombre atmosphere.

In contrast, contemporary Young Adult novels based on *Romeo and Juliet*, tend to emphasize the comedy element. It is as if the generic instability that has been noted in the play (cf. for example Snyder 1970 and Rozett 1985), a play that has lots of affinity with comedy, was 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. Some of these novels based on *Romeo and Juliet* rely on a different chronotope: Avi Wortis's *Romeo and Juliet. Together (and Alive!) At Last* (1987) relocates Shakespeare's story in a school where a group of teenagers put on a quite disastrous and therefore very humorous production of the play (in which “Alack a day” becomes “I lack a day” and “What an unkind hour. Is guilty of this lamentable chance” turns into “What unkind hour is guilty of this lemon table chance”). In the play the two very shy students taking the lead finally have an opportunity to declare their love and after a while students start to identify with their roles: the boy playing Tybalt, who tries to disturb the performance, ends with a week's suspension, while the boy playing Romeo uses Shakespearian words to defend himself from the school bully:

Saltz swung around and began to shout lines from the play at Hamilton. “I do protest,” he said, “I never injured thee!”

That made Hamilton blink. Me too.

Saltz went on. “All the same, I bite my thumb at you!” And he did. Hamilton, for once, was speechless.

I never thought Shakespeare could be useful like that. I was impressed. (Wortis 1987, 58-9)

The world of skirmish and violence of *Romeo and Juliet* is here transposed into teenage bullying at school – a reality that today's young readers may well be familiar with.

David Belbin's *Love Lessons* (1998) is also set in a school.⁶ In this novel the impediment to the romance is not the feud but the difference in age and position of the two central characters, a 15-year-old student and her teacher, Mike, who is in his twenties. This version also emphasizes for a contemporary readership the inappropriateness and inequality of the situation and the secrecy it requires. As in Avi's novel, the love story is paralleled by a production of the play in which Rachel, the Juliet character, is cast in the role of Juliet and a boy her age in the part of Romeo. However, the 'real life' Romeo and Juliet situation between Rachel and Mike breaks the rules of the school microcosm which forbids relationships between students and teachers has dire consequences, as Mike loses his job and Rachel her chance to go to college. As their relationship is ending, a cynical side of Mike emerges:

Mike had never had to finish with anybody before. When the time came, he would break it to her gently. Maybe Rachel would work it out for herself beforehand. Maybe the two of them would simply let things fizzle out over the summer. If Rachel was mature about it, maybe they'd even manage to remain friends.

Or maybe not. (Belbin 1998, 229)

In this novel the didactic intent is more explicit than usual. Young Adult fiction, as has been noted by Falconer (2010, 89) generally concerns itself with questions of gender identity and thresholds between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Here a dangerous threshold appears to have been stepped across, and the love lessons that have been imparted by Mike complicate and interrogate the young reader's notions of romance that wins everything.

Lisa Fiedler's *Romeo's Ex. Rosaline's Story* (2006) is the contemporary novel that most follows Cowden Clarke's format, with which it shares a number of stylistic and ideological features, such as the choice to focus on a marginalized female character, and the construction of a fictional prequel within the narrative. Although Cowden Clarke has an extradiegetic narrator, while Klein's novel presents the story mainly through the eyes of Rosaline, this novel is aligned with *The Girlhood* in the addition of motivation, extra information on the play, and new characters. Even if Rosaline's narration is occasionally interspersed with shorter chapters by Benvolio, Romeo, Mercutio and Tybalt, we watch the familiar story of *Romeo and Juliet* unfold through the wise and commonsensical perspective of a character almost entirely invented but which provides a remarkable alternative

6 Avi Wortis's *Romeo and Juliet. Together (and Alive!) At Last* and David Belbin's *Love Lessons* are discussed in Megan Lynn Isaac 2000.

to Juliet – in fact, Juliet emerges as an ‘anti-model’ for the young girl reader of today. When she confides in Rosaline after Romeo has been banished, her wiser cousin suggests a different course of action:

“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”. (195)

As in Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* (1966) what is offstage (Rosaline’s encounters with Romeo, for example) becomes the main action, while the Romeo and Juliet plot proceeds to its predetermined ending, but with a twist. In the Capulet family vault Rosaline detects that Romeo is not dead and gives him a powerful antidote so that he does not die after all (for Juliet there’s nothing to do although Rosaline is tempted to try and perform a heart transplant from Tybalt who is not dead yet). He escapes death, but not a long tirade from Rosaline on the irrationality of teenage love and the way suicide should not be a solution to a crisis:

“Love?” I roar, fist clenched. “Bloody hell, that word should leave a blister on thy tongue. 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”.

“And now”, he concedes, “she lies here, dead, as would I, were it not for you”. (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). As often happens in Cowden Clarke’s novellas, the Benvolio-Rosaline couple provides a double for the Shakespearian one – coming from the same feuding households, but with more time to get to know each other. Rosaline is an early modern version of a career woman so she refuses Benvolio’s marriage proposal – and this is where more anachronism intrudes in the plot – in order to answer her calling and study medicine at the university of Padua, where she is escorted by none other than Petruccio and Grumio. 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. This novel engages playfully with the Shakespearian intertext and borrows motives from other Shakespearean plays. The reader is constantly alerted to possible collision between various dramatic worlds: for example, Benvolio befriends a couple of orphan twins called Viola and Sebastian and rescues them from poverty, and characters meet at a tavern called "The Untamed Shrew".

In this version of *Romeo and Juliet* Rosaline is given a voice which opens up new narrative possibilities. She plays many parts, from that of confidante and friend (in a way she embraces the friar's role although not his plans) to healer and lover, but refuses that of the victim to the old generation's decisions and actions: her narrative of survival opposes itself to Juliet in the fashioning of an empowered character that challenges and transgresses both the Elizabethan code of gender behaviour and the Great Code of canonical literature. In the absence of family education, characters like Rosaline and Benvolio educate themselves, thus refashioning gender identities that can be resilient and rebellious, but also wise and mature. By contrast, prose retellings in the earlier collections of tales tend to intervene by eliminating characters and sections in order to concentrate on the educational implications of the Young vs Old People's choices and the way the Young respond to the Old by precipitating the crisis started with the feud. With different degrees of inventiveness, both the retellings in the Lambs' tradition and the contemporary amplified prose narratives interrogate the canon "simply through changes in the mode of discourse [...] since the language and style of the pre-texts are usually not then reproduced" (Stephens 2009, 94-5).

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 play, often challenging and channelling them into unexpected critical directions. Although narrative versions of *Romeo and Juliet* can't help being loaded with the baggage of the tragedy's associations, the female young reader 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. Narrative amplification in the Young Adult novels adds a creative impulse to the narrative reconfiguration of the play, implicitly inviting girl readers to reflect on the differences, and occasional similarities, in the growing up crises of early modern or medieval teenagers and today's adolescents.

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