EMPOWERING SHAKESPEARE'S JULIET THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE: *WEST SIDE STORY* (1961), *ROMEO & JULIET (H & M)* (2005), AND *JULIET IMMORTAL* (2011)

EMPODERANDO A LA JULIETA DE SHAKESPEARE A TRAVÉS DE LA CULTURA POPULAR: *AMOR SIN BARRERAS* (1961), *ROMEO Y JULIETA (H & M)* (2005), Y *JULIETA INMORTAL* (2011)

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Fecha de recepción: 02-10-2025
Fecha de aceptación: 28-11-2025

ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare's plays are an inspirational material for the creation of popular culture productions. Indeed, on many occasions, his stories are adapted with a specific purpose in mind. That is the case with Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins' film *West Side Story* (1961), David LaChapelle's advertisement *Romeo & Juliet (H & M)* (2005), and Stacey Jay's novel *Juliet Immortal* (2011). In this paper, I approach the objects of study from a feminist perspective to prove or disprove this research hypothesis: the authors of *West Side Story*, *Romeo & Juliet (H & M)*, and *Juliet Immortal* have reinterpreted the figure of Juliet to construct versions of the character that reflect shifting conceptions of female agency across time. It is concluded that Wise and Robbins, LaChapelle, and Jay portray a more independent Juliet who becomes the only protagonist of this tragic love story as she highlights women's liberation.

KEYWORDS: William Shakespeare; *Romeo and Juliet*; feminism; popular culture; adaptation

RESUMEN

Las obras de William Shakespeare son un material inspirador a la hora de crear producciones de cultura popular. En ocasiones, sus historias se adaptan con un propósito específico. Esto ocurre con *West Side Story* (1961), una película de Robert Wise y Jerome Robbins; *Romeo y Julieta (H & M*) (2005), un anuncio de David LaChapelle; y *Julieta Inmortal* (2011), una novela de Stacey Jay. En este artículo, analizo los objetos de estudio desde una perspectiva feminista para probar o desmentir la siguiente hipótesis: los autores de *West Side Story*, *Romeo y Julieta (H & M*), y *Julieta Inmortal* han reinterpretado la figura de Julieta con el fin de construir versiones del personaje que reflejan las concepciones cambiantes de la potestad de la mujer a lo largo del tiempo. Se ha confirmado que Wise y Robbins, LaChapelle, y Jay retratan una Julieta más independiente, que se convierte en la protagonista de esta historia de amor mientras destaca la liberación de las mujeres.

PALABRAS CLAVE: William Shakespeare; *Romeo y Julieta*; feminismo; cultura popular; adaptación

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been over four centuries since the English playwright William Shakespeare started to delight his public with thrilling plots. Appealing tragedies and comedies like *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest,* among many others, which definitely leave a mark on those immersing themselves in them. From the 1590s onwards, Shakespeare became one of the leading figures of the English theatre tradition, and his work was so successful around the globe that it continues being revisited today. Shakespeare's plays have been adapted in diverse forms, even in spheres other than high culture. His drama has had a huge impact on popular culture too, and his plays have been used as source texts for the production of television, cinema, fiction and advertising. The ubiquity of Shakespeare in contemporary media has been extensively discussed by scholars of adaptation and performance studies. Among them, Richard Burt (2002) highlights the pervasive circulation and remediation of Shakespeare in mass culture; while Pascale Aebischer (2013) and Diana E. Henderson (2006) emphasize the diverse afterlives of his works in film, performance, and digital media. This ongoing adaptive process

has allowed the Bard to adjust to modern cultural and ideological contexts, which differ markedly from the ones that characterized his age (Sanders, 2015: 53).

In the present paper, three popular culture adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) are examined: (i) Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins' *West Side Story* (1961),[1] a film; (ii) *Romeo & Juliet (H & M)*, an advertisement directed by David LaChapelle in 2005; and (iii) Stacey Jay's *Juliet Immortal* (2011), a novel. The main reason for this choice is that it appears that the authors of these appropriations might have reimagined Shakespeare's plot with the same noteworthy objective in mind, which is giving Juliet a more meaningful role in her love story with Romeo. In line with such aim, the following hypothesis was formulated for the study: the authors of *West Side Story*, *Romeo & Juliet (H & M)*, and *Juliet Immortal* have reinterpreted the figure of Juliet to construct versions of the character that reflect shifting conceptions of female agency across time. Hence, I have approached the objects of study from a feminist perspective, applying gender studies as the critical framework. After the literature review, the analysis of the three popular culture adaptations is presented, chronologically ordered.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is essential first to briefly clarify what I mean by gender studies, as this is an intricate domain consisting of several subfields. For the present paper, I particularly followed the subfield of feminist criticism, which stems from the women's movement of the 1960s. Feminist criticism examines the way in which literature and other cultural productions either reinforce or react against women's social, political, economic and psychological repression (Tyson, 2006: 84-120). In the 1970s, feminist thinkers tended to scrutinise female portrayals in male productions, and they did it in a mostly combative mood (Barry, 2017: 122-123). Then, from the 1980s onwards, feminist criticism became more eclectic since it relied on other approaches such as Marxism and linguistics. Feminist critics turned their attention from sexist male productions to promoting female experience and, therefore, they strived to include women's works in the previously mostly male literary canon (Barry, 2017: 123; Thompson, 1988: 85-88).

There is substantial research on Shakespeare's works from a feminist discourse, generating two opposing scholarly trends: (a) Shakespeare as a revolutionary feminist writer who transcends his own culture's patriarchal structures by creating powerful and

[1]It is an adaptation of the 1957 Broadway musical with the same title, conceived by Jerome Robbins, composed by Leonard Bernstein, with lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, libretto by Arthur Laurents and choreography by Robbins. Both productions were inspired by the same Shakespearean source.

unconventional female characters, and (b) Shakespeare as an uncritical follower and supporter of the male chauvinist society of his time since he portrays sexist men and oppressed women (McEachern, 1988; Novy, 1981; Thompson, 1988). Feminist readings of *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) reflect these trends as well. On the one hand, multiple critics emphasize that Juliet's agency must be understood in relation to the restrictive patriarchal structures of early modern Verona, rather than in comparison with contemporary gender realities. Coppélia Kahn, Natasha Korda, Marianne Novy, and Gail Kern Paster argue that Juliet actually demonstrates remarkable emotional, rhetorical, and sexual autonomy, even as the tragic framework ultimately constrains her options. Within this scholarly trend, Juliet is defined as a complex character, more remarkable than Romeo because she is rebellious, courageous, wild, and intelligent (Brown, 1996). Brown argues that, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare changes traditional gender roles because it is the female character, Juliet, who dominates and "tames" the male one, that is, her beloved Romeo, and this opposes the stereotypical male-dominant love relationship that prevailed at the time Shakespeare's plot is set (1996: 334). Moreover, Juliet disobeys her father. Instead of marrying Paris as Lord Capulet wants, Juliet runs away and marries the man she loves. In this manner, she fights against patriarchy and defeats the standardized sexist rules which women felt forced to follow at that time (Kakkonen and Penjak, 2015: 25).

On the other hand, several researchers have accused Shakespeare of supporting patriarchal hegemonic forces in his play for varied reasons. For instance, Jajja states that, in *Romeo and Juliet*, there are far fewer females than males, and all of them are secondary characters who are not involved in any relevant action such as Lady Montague and Lady Capulet. By contrast, most male characters play a protagonist role in the story (2014: 233). Goldstein (1996) and Jajja (2014) claim that the playwright portrays Juliet as Lord Capulet's material property because he aims to choose his daughter's future. He even arranges Juliet's marriage to Paris without asking her about it. In this vein, Watson and Dickey's statement is more radical as they assert that, like Lucrece and Persephone, Juliet is depicted as an object which is observed and raped by the sexist Romeo. Besides being silenced by family and social expectations, and in the end by death, there is a constant imagery of penetration and possession when addressing the character of Juliet and her body (Watson and Dickey, 2005). Other contributors to this trend have discussed that, in *Romeo and Juliet*, males' behaviour strengthens sexist standards. As an example, Appelbaum highlights that Friar Lawrence urges Romeo to show his masculine qualities on the grounds that crying is an embarrassing "effeminate attitude", presenting emotional reactions as a weakness which is exclusively attributed to

women and which, therefore, men must avoid (1997: 258). According to these scholars, Shakespeare's feminism in *Romeo and Juliet* as regards Juliet's role is quite limited (Brown, 1996; Novy, 1981), which is what the authors of some Shakespearean adaptations have apparently attempted to modify.

Despite the abundance of feminist criticism on Shakespeare's play itself, the results of an exhaustive bibliographical search reveal that feminist scholarship on adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* is comparatively scarce. Scholars of Shakespearean cinema – such as French (2006), Guneratne (2008), and Jackson and Jackson (2007) – have examined how the playwright's works have been translated into audio-visual media. There are more specific studies addressing the film adaptations of a particular play: for example, Crowl (2014) investigates the relationship between *Hamlet* and its screen versions, and Hastuti (2015) focuses on subtitling strategies in a cinematic *Romeo and Juliet*. Yet feminist approaches to *Romeo and Juliet* on screen have tended to concentrate on a handful of high-profile adaptations, mostly on Franco Zeffirelli's (1968) and Baz Luhrmann's (1996) films. Scholars like Courtney Lehmann have explored how these versions alternately amplify and undermine Juliet's agency, while adaptation theorists such as Pascale Aebischer and Diana E. Henderson discuss the ways in which screen performances reconfigure gender and spectatorship. Nevertheless, feminist analyses of the broader screen afterlives of *Romeo and Juliet* – including musical, commercial, or genre-bending reinterpretations – remain strikingly underdeveloped.

Most available research on *West Side Story* (1961) has centered on issues of ethnicity and cultural politics (Secades 2018; Wells 2011), although there is some gender-based scholarly discussion around it. Baber's chapter (2025), published in *The Cambridge Companion to West Side Story*, offers a nuanced account of how the musical destabilizes and reconfigures gender norms through its vocal writing, choreography, and character design. In the same vein, Wolf (2011) situates the characters of Maria and Anita within broader debates about female agency and embodiment. However, this constitutes just a small part of the monograph, a historical survey of Broadway musicals from the 1950s to the 2000s, in which the author shows how gender and sexuality are constructed in stage shows.

Similarly, some scholars have scrutinised Shakespeare's general influence in advertising, typically only in passing. Lanier addresses Shakespeare's presence in publicity when discussing his impact on popular culture (2002), and Holderness explores the use of Shakespearean quotations in advertising contexts (2018). There are just a few academic publications exploring how *Romeo and Juliet* has been specifically appropriated within

advertising discourse. Zanoni (2022) analyzes a Levi's jeans ad that draws on Shakespearean material, not directly on the plays themselves, but as a layered adaptation, since this ad re-mediates Shakespeare through Luhrmann's cinematic creation of *Romeo and Juliet*. Of particular relevance to the present study is Cieślak's chapter (2023). The author examines LaChapelle's commercial together with Levine's film *Warm Bodies* (2013) as adaptations "de-centering the hypo-text," given that both drink mostly from Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) instead of from the Shakespearean source. These two publications highlight the work by Shakespeare as a semiotic resource, not as a textual source anymore. They also demonstrate that, today, advertising is an essential site of Shakespearean appropriation. Nevertheless, research on LaChapelle's *Romeo & Juliet (H & M)* is rather limited, and, to the best of my knowledge, no gender-based studies on this ad have been conducted so far.

As for Stacey Jay's *Juliet Immortal*, it has usually been examined together with other novels which are based on *Romeo and Juliet*, as it happens within the area of advertising. These studies explore the impact of Shakespeare's love tragedy in young adult fiction, and what these fiction adaptations offer readers in comparison with the play (Hartley-Kroeger 2020; Osborne 2015; Wadham 2013). Nevertheless, no feminist study has been carried out on *Juliet Immortal* to date. All in all, researchers have addressed particular types of media adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* separately, and feminist readings are not as common as one might expect. This paper contributes to fill a relevant gap because it presents a comparative examination of the way in which the play has been adapted across three different mass-media modes (cinema, publicity, and fiction), and from a feminist lens.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE POPULAR CULTURE ADAPTATIONS

3.1. Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins' West Side Story *(1961)*

Shakespeare's drama went beyond theatre and reached the big screen. His works have been the source of inspiration for countless filmmakers all around the world already from the end of the nineteenth century, and all his comedies and tragedies have been adapted as movies. The first cinematic renderings of Shakespearean material were *King John* (1899), a short silent film by William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, and *Le Duel d'Hamlet* (1900), by Clément Maurice and Paul Decauville. These early adaptations were around 1-12 minutes long and represented just a few key scenes from the play. There was an emphasis on the tragedies at first.

Shakespearean film criticism thus emerged in the early 1900s as part of journalistic criticism, and it flourished in the 1950s and 1960s. The field was greatly influenced by New Historicism and cultural studies. At the beginning, Shakespearean film analysts focused on the content of the adaptations itself, or, to put it another way, on the plot, and they left cinematic form and theory aside (Burt and Newstok, 2010: 88-89). In most cases, they examined Shakespearean cinematographic adaptations just in terms of fidelity to the playwright's text and privileged literature over cinema (Walker, 2009). Nevertheless, in line with Lanier's view of the Shakespearean rhizome (2014) and Hutcheon's support of a dialogic and horizontal analysis of source text and adaptation (2006), the current study of these cinema appropriations is based on the idea that these are autonomous films which interact with the source text. Film analysts no longer regard these appropriations merely as secondary works (Burt and Newstok, 2010).

Romeo and Juliet (1597) has been adapted as a film on many occasions. *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) by Franco Zeffirelli, *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) by Baz Luhrmann, *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) by John Madden, *Private Romeo* (2011) by Alan Brown, *Gnomeo and Juliet* (2011) by Kelly Asbury, and *Romeo and Juliet* (2013) by Carlo Carlei are just a small sample. Among these adaptations, there are films which are almost identical to Shakespeare's text as regards plot and setting, cartoon versions, and films which are particularly aimed at exposing social matters like homophobia and racism.

One of the most acclaimed filmic adaptations of the playwright's tragic love is *West Side Story*. Through the frame of Romeo and Juliet's relationship, Wise and Robbins represent Latin communities' settlement in the United States and the initially controversial coexistence between white Americans and Latin Americans. As argued by García-Periago, changing the original setting is common in cinematographic appropriations of *Romeo and Juliet* as it contributes to popularize and politicize both the film and Shakespeare's text (2016: 197). Wise and Robbins portray urban violence, a worrying consequence of the ethnical discrimination that prevailed there in the mid 50s, modernizing Shakespeare's narrative (Palita, 2013: 88). Apart from modifying the sociocultural setting, in this appropriation, Maria is a rather different character as compared with the playwright's Juliet.

Maria may be considered as a feminist character because she is a daring woman who rejects the sexist standards of her time. By way of illustration, she complains that, since she has arrived in the US, all she has done is sewing and being at home, just like her repressed female predecessors: "One month have I been in this country-do I ever even touch excitement? I sew all day, I sit all night. For what did my fine brother bring me here?" (Wise and Robbins, 1961:

00:29:22 to 00:29:30). As she becomes aware of such oppression, she reacts to it and starts going out. In fact, Maria is more modern and audacious than the Puerto Rican girls around her, something which is quite remarkable when she is getting ready for the dance with Anita. Maria wants to wear a dress with a big neckline and dye it red. However, Anita thinks Maria is crazy and convinces her to wear a white dress with a more discreet cleavage. This tension might be read simply as youthful rebellion, but it reflects an incipient desire for female bodily autonomy.

Following Shakespeare's narrative, Maria is regarded as a property. Like Lord Capulet, her brother Bernardo tries to supervise everything she does, and he wants her to marry Chino regardless of her feelings for Tony. He even claims that she will be under his control until she gets married, that is to say, until she belongs to another man. Nevertheless, Maria takes the opportunity of having moved to the United States to begin pursuing freedom. Her fight for emancipation is made clearer when Bernardo asks Anita and Chino to take care of Maria, and she exclaims: "Tonight is the real beginning of my life as a young lady of America" (Wise and Robbins, 1961: 00:31:29 to 00:31:32). In such a way, Maria rejects patriarchal Puerto Rican society and embraces North American culture. She appears to be aware of the fact that, at that time, it was easier for women to stand up for their rights in North America than in her home country. It is important to bear in mind that she works in a bridal shop run by women, where she could get inspired by a feeling of female strength.

Maria is an independent girl. As opposed to Shakespeare's Juliet, she does not depend economically on any man and takes part in the public sphere whenever she wishes to. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo meets with his friends, he fights against the Capulets, and he even moves to a different town while Juliet's only friend is the Nurse and she is confined to her house. On the contrary, despite Bernardo's attempts to control her, Maria usually escapes his gaze and has fun outside with her Puerto Rican friends quite frequently.

Apart from being modern and having an independent lifestyle, Maria is a more relevant character than Tony in their love story. In Shakespeare's play, both lovers die together. However, in *West Side Story*, only Tony dies. Instead of being a passive female character who just observes what men do or fainting when realizing that Tony is dead, she stands up and shouts, making all male characters aware of their own guilt for such tragedy. Her protagonist role is emphasised in the final scene of the movie through cinema techniques (see figure 1 in appendix). As can be perceived in this shot, Maria is placed at the front of the camera while all boys surround her on both sides of the frame. She wears more colourful and brighter clothes than the other characters, and most of them are looking at her, just as spectators are encouraged

to do through this combination of camera and colour effects. Thus, Maria becomes the central character in one of the most remarkable scenes of the film.

Wise and Robbins' Maria is such a powerful female character that she is turned into a dignified, quasi-divine figure throughout the film. In Shakespeare's text, both Romeo and Juliet praise each other, and Juliet regards Romeo as a holy man whom she adores. This is especially noticeable, for instance, when she defines Romeo as "the god of [her] idolatry" (Mowat and Werstine, 2011: 77). In *West Side Story*, it is Tony who regards Maria as a holy woman whom he worships. When Tony is blissfully describing his feelings for Maria, he tells his boss that God is not male, but female: "And I tell you a secret, Doc. It ain't a man that's up there. It's a girl. A lady" (Wise and Robbins, 1961: 01:19:45 to 01:19:52). The godly lady Tony is referring to in this quotation is Maria, and he is explaining that she has become the centre of his world. This link Tony establishes between Maria and a sort of heavenly authority becomes more explicit in "Maria", a song Tony sings after meeting her: "Maria, say it loud and there's music playing. / Say it soft and it's almost like praying" (Wise and Robbins, 1961: 00:45:17 to 00:45:31).[2] In this fragment from the song, Tony compares saying her lover's name with praying, which makes Maria a saint whom he can venerate. This change of Juliet's name is no accident, then.

For her part, instead of using music for praising Tony, as he does, and just as Juliet adores Romeo, Maria praises her own female qualities through a catchy song. When telling her friends that she has fallen in love with Tony, she proudly describes herself as a pretty, witty, and charming girl as follows: "I feel pretty, / Oh so pretty, / I feel pretty and witty and gay. / And I pity any girl who isn't me today. / I feel charming, / Oh so charming, / It's alarming how charming I feel. / And so pretty that I hardly can believe I'm real" (Wise and Robbins, 1961: 01:23:47 to 01:24:11).[3] Although light-hearted, this attitude may be linked to early feminist ideas around self-worth and self-definition (Langford, 1994).

While a quasi-divine status is conferred upon Maria, and she represents an exemplary Catholic girl, she is neither obedient nor submissive (as she is expected to be), quite the contrary. Maria is portrayed as a mature woman, deeply engaged in religious practices but also determined to start enjoying life. She has become aware of women's advancement and, therefore, she aims to change her own situation accordingly. This is particularly noticeable when she is arguing about necklines with Anita, as she states: "It is now to be a dress for

[2] The lyrics for the song "Maria" were written by Stephen Sondheim.
[3] The lyrics for the song "I feel pretty" were written by Stephen Sondheim.

dancing, no longer for praying" (Wise and Robbins, 1961: 00:29:06 to 00:29:10). Hence, not only does Maria fight for emancipation but she also remarks the liberating changes women have gone through. Her assertion that the dress is "for dancing" symbolizes a desire for bodily expression and self-determined pleasure—an early echo of the second-wave critique of restrictive feminine modesty and sexual regulation (Friedan, 1963). This duality (heavenly identity – rebellious behaviour) makes her a complex and extraordinarily appealing protagonist.

The film posters are also revealing. As may be seen in figure 2 in appendix, Natalie Wood is advertised on a separate line, and in bigger letters than Richard Beymer and the other actors. She was already an icon by the time *West Side Story* was released, whereas Beymer was still rather unknown. The casting for the role of Maria was probably specifically designed to make her a star character. In fact, in most of the film posters, she is placed in a strategic position: at the centre and ahead of Tony, as if he was chasing her.[4] Wise and Robbins' intention to make Juliet (Maria) brighter than the male protagonist seems quite clear. Maria's prominence aligns with the era's growing interest in representing women as central figures, not merely complements to male protagonists. Concretely, *West Side Story* predates the boom of second-wave feminism, yet, it still constitutes a representative cultural product of that momentum. Maria does not challenge patriarchal structures as such, but her resistance to Bernardo's authority, her desire to express herself freely and through her physical appearance, and her significant moments of moral clarity echo second-wave feminist critiques of domestic control and gendered social expectations (Baxandall and Gordon, 2002).

3.2. David LaChapelle's Romeo & Juliet (H & M) *(2005)*

Shakespeare's impact on advertising is large. Numerous publicists base their ads on the Bard's plots, making a connection between publicity and high culture, so as to authenticate their works and, therefore, reach a wider public (Sanders, 2015: 55-60). This trend dates back to the late nineteenth century, when advertising was flourishing. There was a rise of mass-produced and mass-distributed commodities, mainly industrial daily products which were previously made by households themselves. Consequently, publicists struggled to encourage citizens to replace their hand-made products by these commodities. Consumers usually had concerns on the

[4] Other relevant film posters are accessible online. See, for example, https://www.iberlibro.com/arte-grabados/WEST-SIDE-STORY-1961Dir-ROBERT-WISE/22632938856/bd and https://filmartgallery.com/products/west-side-story-7661?srsltid=AfmBOopfcinARaXwsjknbMkPm28RkD_pzFyMdu63L1NGGCRl0FpA839h.

quality of the advertised items. Shakespeare functioned as a quality seal since he was popular and was linked to a high status given his prominent place in the world of theatre. Employing his works facilitated sales to a large extent (Lanier and Kinney, 2012: 505-509). As an example, *Romeo and Juliet* became the source text for an advertisement of chewing tobacco (see figure 3 in appendix), and several lines from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be found in a Levi Strauss' spot released in 2005. According to Lanier, the writer's relevance provides publicity with more cultural authority. Hence, viewers are pleased when they are able to identify the references to such prestigious plays (Lanier, 2002; 2011). Besides authentication and cultural prestige, Shakespeare-based publicity is so successful because it fosters fan engagement. Since the Bard's followers want to strengthen their fan identification, they enjoy purchasing everything that relates to him. In a nutshell, as Blackwell puts it, Shakespeare has become a brand in itself (2018: 26).

At the beginning of Shakespearean advertising, Shakespeare's text was required for references to be recognised by spectators. However, the current "post-textual" era does not involve Shakespeare's words at all. Instead of using quotes from his plays, subtle references to Shakespeare are made by use of images and visual cues (Lanier, 2011: 145-146). Lanier argues that, at present, Shakespearean ads rely so much on visual representation for two main reasons: the everyday influence of images through mass media, and the easier global spread of mostly visual ads as they do not need to be translated from one language to another (2011: 148-149). "Post-textual" Shakespearean advertising is becoming so influential that it has led critics to raise several questions concerning the boundaries of what can be considered "Shakespearean" (Lanier, 2011: 161-162).

Focusing now on *Romeo and Juliet*, Luhrmann played an undoubtedly mediating role in this sense. Like Wise and Robbins, Luhrmann relocated the lovers' tragedy into a stylised urban environment marked by racial tension, gang conflict, and media spectacle in his *Romeo+Juliet* (1996), associating the Bard's tragedy with a visually saturated postmodern cityscape. However, his film adaptation is even more visually striking than *West Side Story*: neon colours, quick cuts, and billboards invaded the screen, reflecting the global emergence of branding and the MTV aesthetics of the 1990s. In *Romeo+Juliet*, the lovers are placed in "Verona Beach," a setting dominated by commercial media. Guns are branded, cars carry religious decals, and there is glitter and light everywhere. Through this film, Luhrmann embedded Shakespeare's tragedy in advertising iconography, proving that the playwright could be represented through image rather than words. Luhrmann established a new visual language

for Shakespearean appropriation and became a model for advertisers (Walker, 2000; Zanoni, 2022).

A prime example of this kind of advertising is *Romeo & Juliet (H & M)*, an ad by David LaChapelle which is based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and it shows the tragic love story of two youths in a contemporary setting. In tune with Lanier's assertions, the references to the writer's play are easily identified in this ad because LaChapelle recreates Shakespeare's plot through the use of visual symbols; for instance, the masque ball where the two lovers meet (see figure 4 in appendix) and Juliet's balcony (see figure 5 in appendix). LaChapelle actually applies Luhrmann's cinematic Shakespearean language: the neon-bright palette, the glamour-oriented youth culture, and the music-video pacing. The visual symbols described before are almost wordless, yet Shakespeare's background is perfectly recognisable. Besides, like Wise and Robbins and Jay, LaChapelle portrays an updated version of Juliet Capulet that catches all our attention.

In *Romeo & Juliet (H & M)*, Juliet takes the protagonist role in the story since the whole ad is presented from her perspective, and Romeo becomes a passive character. Juliet sings a song through which she narrates her relationship with Romeo, and, therefore, viewers only listen to her voice as only her thoughts and feelings are reflected. By way of illustration, she expresses her sadness for Romeo's death when she finds his corpse on the road as follows: "And I am telling you, / You are not going. / You are the best man I've ever known, there's no way you can ever go. / No, no, no, no way. / No, no, no, no way I'm leaving without you. / I'm not leaving without you, / I don't wanna be free" (LaChapelle, 2005: 02:13 to 02:49).

In addition, contrary to what we are told by the English playwright, only one lover dies in *Romeo & Juliet (H & M)*: Romeo. In fact, several excerpts from the ad remind us of the final scene of *West Side Story* because, like the film's spectators, in this spot, we discover that Romeo has died while Juliet survives and captures our attention. LaChapelle uses several techniques to emphasise Juliet's remarkable role in different shots which show us Romeo's death (see figure 6 in appendix). Like Maria, Juliet is placed on the floor and other secondary characters surround her, in this case, the police. Besides, as can be noticed in figure 6, dark hues prevail in this scene. There is little lightning since it is raining and it is night, and most characters wear dark clothes. The only gleam of light which can be perceived in this shot is Juliet as she wears a bright yellow jacket which stands out in the frame. In this manner, LaChapelle directs the spectators' attention to Juliet by means of the actors' position, as well as lightning and colour effects.

Juliet herself highlights her significant role in the advertisement when she emphasises the fact that it is her story: "When I first saw you, / […] I said 'that's *my* dream, / that's *my* dream'" (LaChapelle, 2005: 01:07 to 01:18; emphasis added). By contrast, Romeo is dead from the beginning of the ad, and the only moments in which he appears alive is when Juliet is remembering and describing the time they spent together. This shift is not merely a character update, for it reflects broader transformations in feminist culture. Juliet's prominence in the narrative reflects postfeminist and third-wave sensibilities, in which female agency is articulated through self-expression, emotional self-definition, and the reclamation of desire (Gill 2007). In fact, third-wave feminism celebrates feminine aesthetics (colour, fashion, performance) as tools for empowerment rather than superficiality (McRobbie, 2009). From the very beginning of the ad, Juliet is presented as a coquettish, well-dressed woman (see figure 7 in appendix). She shows up in front of her dressing table, smoothing her hair and sprucing herself up, while red and blue lights illuminate her silhouette. No doubt her appearance is an empowering aspect for her. Juliet's flashy jacket in that dramatic scene and her styling in general visually encode her autonomy and feminist attitudes.

Furthermore, like Maria in *West Side Story*, LaChapelle's Juliet rejects sexist standards and she is depicted as an independent, free, and powerful woman. Her feminist evolution is also emphasised in the song, when Juliet affirms that she has become a strong woman: "I needed a dream to make me strong" (LaChapelle, 2005: 1:18 to 01:26). Thus, female strength is reimagined as emotional resilience and self-realisation, a hallmark of postfeminist discourse (Gill, 2007).

Neither Juliet nor Romeo stick to the standardized female and male attitudes, as opposed to their stereotypical behaviour shown in Shakespeare's play. For instance, Juliet gives Romeo a rose when he goes to visit her, an act of love which is often attributed to men. By reversing this traditional gesture, LaChapelle engages with third-wave feminism's emphasis on gender fluidity and the undoing of rigid heterosexual conventions. In such a way, this Juliet opposes several patriarchal norms – not through overt political rebellion, but through an aestheticized, emotionally centered, and media-savvy rearticulation of female agency that speaks directly to contemporary youth culture.

3.3. Stacey Jay's Juliet Immortal *(2011)*

It has been argued that Shakespeare himself was inspired by earlier Italian and French prose novellas for his *Romeo and Juliet*. Scholars have widely associated Masuccio Salernitano's

Mariotto e Ganozza (1476), Luigi Da Porto's *Historia novellamente ritrovata di due nobili amanti* (1524-1530), or Matteo Bandello's *Novelle* (1554) with the playwright's work as direct prose sources, given that they present a parallel thematic structure: feuding families, secret marriage, and a fake-death plot device (Levenson, 1984). Post-Shakespeare novelists continued reshaping *Romeo and Juliet*, focusing on different aspects of the tale so that it is adapted to the evolving profile of its readership. Today, the emphasis is typically placed on mental health and emotional volatility, and tragedy has adopted a more developmental tone, conceived as an opportunity for psychological growth. Myth and fantasy are also recurrent themes.

Given Shakespeare's inclusion in the school curriculum, many young adult fiction writers have used Shakespearean characters in a modern setting which is closer to the learners' reality. *Romeo and Juliet* is the most popular Shakespeare play among the youth and, not surprisingly, then, the one which has been adapted the most within this genre (Paravano, 2017: 53). As the protagonists are young, it is assumed that teenagers will easily relate to the couple's experiences and that, therefore, they will find these appropriations appealing (Hartley-Kroeger, 2020: 19). An illustrative example of an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in fiction is Stacey Jay's *Juliet Immortal*, set in California, in a digitally-driven community where free love prevails. This novel is a sequel to the Bard's play and it shows what happened to the young lovers after the end told by the writer. At the beginning of the book, we find Juliet awakening in the crypt, and her beloved Romeo trying to murder her in order to ascend and be immortal. Juliet does not die, and instead becomes an Ambassador of Light, a figure in charge of protecting soul mates. She fights against all evil and this includes Romeo, who belongs to the Mercenaries of the Apocalypse, those destroying souls to feed their own lives. Within this fantasy atmosphere, Stacey Jay has made substantial modifications to Shakespeare's Juliet, making her a thought-provoking character worthy of a feminist-based analysis.

One of the reasons why Jay's Juliet may be considered a feminist character in *Juliet Immortal* is that, similarly to what happens in Wise and Robins' film and in LaChapelle's advertisement, she plays a more striking role than in Shakespeare's work. Whereas in the source text both Romeo and Juliet are the main characters of the tragedy, in this novel, Juliet is in the foreground and Romeo is in the background. As analysed in the cases of *West Side Story* and *Romeo and Juliet (H & M)*, Juliet is saved, and this constitutes a narrative tendency within young adult fiction appropriations of Shakespeare's tragedy. Juliet is resurrected to actively challenge patriarchy. In *Juliet Immortal*, she opposes Romeo and protects other young women while reclaiming control of the narrative. According to Olive (2023), these authors reinscribe

agency onto Juliet's body – her resurrection is a form of feminist-oriented writing. Her corporeal transformation encodes resistance. As LaChapelle's Juliet in the ad, Jay's Juliet is the only protagonist and the first-person narrator of the narrative as she is the one who tells her own story. In fact, she falls in love with another man, Ben, and the whole book revolves around their complex relationship. For his part, Romeo becomes a secondary character because he only appears at some moments in which Juliet is still the protagonist. There are two chapters which are devoted to Romeo, but just to emphasise his painful feelings and, in turn, to better set the context for the next events of the plot. For example, in chapter 18, Romeo becomes a temporary first-person narrator in order to express his sadness after realizing that Juliet loves Ben. Romeo takes a secondary role both in the narrative and in Juliet's heart.

The character of Romeo is developed in connection with negative feelings: all he represents is darkness. From the very outset of the story, he is portrayed as a selfish, sexist boy as he uses Juliet as a means to achieve a personal aim (immortality). His work is to persuade every soul mate to follow his example, that is to say, to sacrifice their true love and become an invincible Mercenary of the Apocalypse. When attempting to assassinate Juliet, he kills their love for each other. Stacey Jay thus turns Romeo into an antagonist at the same time as Juliet becomes a heroine. This reconfiguration of Juliet as a supernatural warrior who resists patriarchal romantic fatalism mirrors some features of third-wave feminism, which highlighted women's capacity to rewrite inherited narratives and rejected the victim/perpetrator binary (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000).

In addition, in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the young lovers' relationship is quite balanced in terms of power. However, in *Juliet Immortal*, Juliet is a dominant and resolute female who subdues Romeo. In this case, she is the one who sets the pace. For instance, readers are told that Romeo and Juliet are about to die, and that the only solution to their problem is casting a spell together and loving each other again. Hence, Romeo's life depends on Juliet's willingness to cooperate with him. Juliet refuses to help him, and she is determined to find an alternative solution on her own. As Romeo's life and fate are at Juliet's hands, he submits to her beloved girl. Juliet's autonomy also resonates with postfeminist media culture, in which empowerment is framed as the heroine's capacity to make her own choices, manage her emotions, and define her own narrative path (McRobbie, 2009).

Still, the most noteworthy feature which makes Stacey Jay's Juliet a more updated character as compared to Shakespeare's female protagonist is her awareness and refusal of patriarchal standards, something which is clearly reflected and emphasised throughout the

narrative. Whereas in Shakespeare's play Juliet regards Romeo as a sacred man to be adored, as discussed above, in *Juliet Immortal* Juliet regrets having been so blindly in love with Romeo and having treated him as a sacred creature as she thinks to herself: "It's impossible to believe I once dreamt of spending my life *worshipping* this monster" (Jay, 2011: 15). The fact that Juliet stresses the word *worshipping* means that she has realized that both Romeo and herself share an equal social status and that, therefore, she should not have adored him as a superior human being. Also, in Shakespeare's tragedy, Juliet addresses Romeo as her master, assuming and reinforcing her role as Romeo's property. Nevertheless, in Stacey Jay's novel, Juliet reasserts her feminist position and emancipation by making clear that she is not Romeo's property when replying to his sexist comment on women: "'A white lie' he [Romeo] shrugs. 'As is the case with many compliments men give their women'. 'I [Juliet] am not *your* woman, and I couldn't care less if –'" (Jay, 2011: 99). By stressing the possessive pronoun *your*, Juliet underlines that she is not a man's property anymore.

Like Maria, the Juliet portrayed in *Juliet Immortal* is so aware of gender inequality that she highlights women's improved legal protection in contrast with the time in which Shakespeare's play is set, when she says: "'Despite his strength, bars *can* hold him [Romeo], and the western lawmen of recent centuries haven't hesitated to punish men for abusing their women. Not like in the earlier days, when it was legal for a man to beat his wife, legal for him to throw her into the streets to starve, legal for him to –'" (Jay, 2011: 21). This explicit reference to historical shifts in the legal treatment of violence against women resonates strongly with fourth-wave feminist concerns, which foreground gender-based violence and the need for institutional accountability. Hence, in *Juliet Immortal*, Juliet is depicted as a dominant and liberated woman who is aware of patriarchal norms and who fights against them, embodying a layered combination of third-wave agency, postfeminist self-determination, and fourth-wave resistance to coercive masculinities.

Stacey Jay was probably prompted to re-imagine Shakespeare's Juliet this way by the teenage love culture of the 2000s, saturated with diverse forms of sexism. It was at that time, partly due to the explosive growth of the Internet, that teen girls started to be sexualized in fashion and social media, toxic love stories were popularized, and sexual violence spread (Ward, 2016: 560-577). By granting Juliet a critical consciousness about gender norms and by empowering her to narrate her own story, Jay provides a counter-model to a culture in which girls' identities were often constructed externally. Just like other young adult fiction writers

(Melinda Taub in *Still Star-Crossed* or Rachel Caine in *Prince of Shadows*), Jay surely wanted this powerful Juliet to set an example among contemporary teenage females.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The evidence gathered from the analyses supports the hypothesis formulated because it has been shown how Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins, David LaChapelle, and Stacey Jay have probably reinterpreted Shakespeare's Juliet to create versions of the character that represent shifting conceptions of female empowerment throughout time. In fact, the three recreations of Juliet echo different stages of the feminist movement. In *West Side Story*, Maria is a modern and audacious woman who fights for independence as she starts her new American life; she makes her living; she becomes a more remarkable character than Tony in several key scenes of the movie; she is turned into a dignified figure; and she highlights the emancipatory changes she has experienced as a female. Concerning *Romeo & Juliet (H & M)*, Juliet is also depicted as a feminist character in this adaptation because the whole advertisement revolves around her thoughts and emotions, leaving Romeo aside, and she is a strong woman who acts contrary to patriarchal norms. With regard to *Juliet Immortal*, Juliet is the only protagonist and the first-person narrator of the narrative while Romeo becomes a secondary character; she is a dominant woman who subdues her lover; she fights against sexist standards as she proclaims her freedom; and she underlines and praises women's improved conditions.

Despite helping to fill a significant research gap, further studies are still needed to illuminate how feminist frameworks continue to shape Shakespearean appropriations in contemporary popular culture. Future research might explore Juliet's evolving role in a different range of media environments, such as videogames or fanfiction communities, to determine whether similar patterns emerge beyond cinema, advertising, and fiction. Examining the afterlives of other commonly reimagined Shakespearean heroines, namely Ophelia, Desdemona, or lady Macbeth, is also a potential avenue for research. Such work would advance our understanding of the ways in which Shakespeare's female characters serve to represent feminist debates. In addition, conducting similar research focusing on these characters' race or socioeconomic status would also help to identify other current cultural anxieties.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1. Maria is devastated, on the floor, while the Jets and the Sharks surround her after Tony's death. Wise, Robert and Jerome Robbins. 1961. *West Side Story*. Beverly Hills, CA: United Artists. Used for academic purposes.

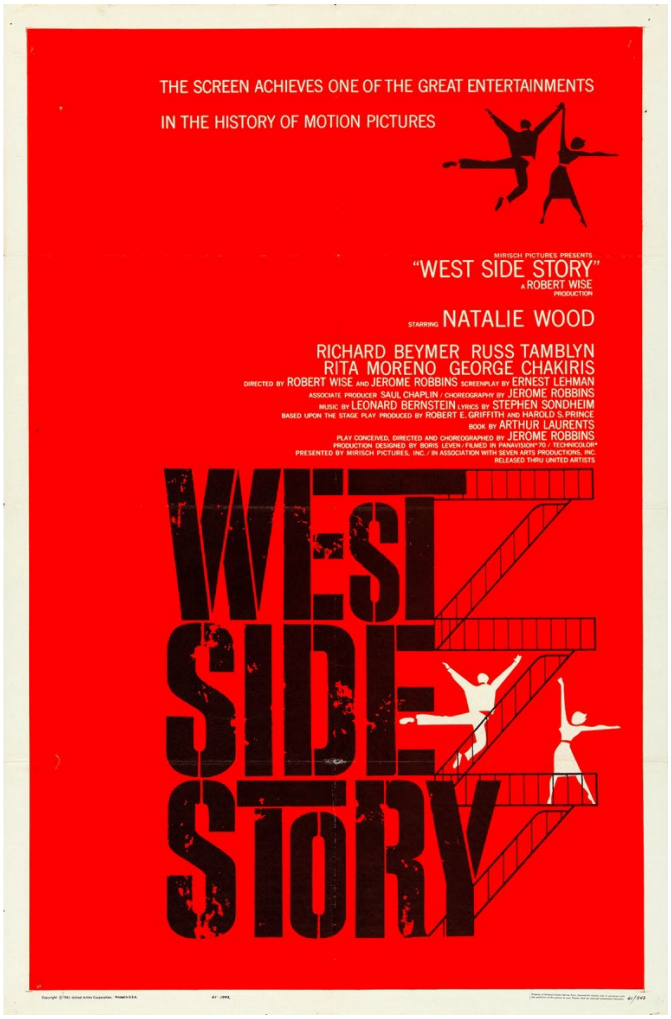

Figure 2. *West Side Story* (1961), film poster by Joe Caroff, created in 1960. <https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:West_Side_Story_1961_film_poster.jpg>. Accessed November 4, 2025. From Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 3. An advertisement of James Moran & Co's chewing tobacco based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.
C Hamilton & Co. Lith. and Mo. St. Louis. 1874. "James Moran & Co.'s Romeo fine-cut chewing tobacco". <https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.13469/>. Accessed August 2, 2021. No known publications restrictions as detailed in "Library of Congress."

Figure 4. Romeo sees Juliet in the masque ball
LaChapelle, David. 2005. "Romeo & Juliet (H & M)".
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XY7rMoteGqU>. Accessed June 27, 2021. Used for academic purposes.

Figure 5. Juliet waits for Romeo at her balcony.
LaChapelle, David. 2005. "Romeo & Juliet (H & M)".
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XY7rMoteGqU>. Accessed June 27, 2021. Used for academic purposes.

Figure 6. Juliet laments Romeo's death while several policemen surround her.
LaChapelle, David. 2005. "Romeo & Juliet (H & M)".
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XY7rMoteGqU>. Accessed June 27, 2021. Used for academic purposes.

Figure 7. Juliet gets ready in front of her dressing table.
LaChapelle, David. 2005. "Romeo & Juliet (H & M)".
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XY7rMoteGqU>. Accessed November 18, 2025. Used for academic purposes.