CHAPTER 2

Shakespeare and Popular Culture: *Romeo and Juliet* in Film and Pop Music

**SHAKESPEARE AND POPULAR CULTURE**

Shakespeareans also follow cultural critics by replacing the term “mass culture” with “popular culture” (Williams 1976; Hebidge 1979; Ross 1989; Strinati 1995; Penley 1991; Frecerro 1999) as Richard Burt in his edited book Introduction “To E or Not to E? Disposing Schlokspeare in the Age of Digital Media” mentions (2002:3). Therefore, the importance of Shakespeare and popular culture is necessary for us to scrutinize. As Angela McRobbie’s book *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* argues the importance and the need for feminists to ask questions concerning of the significance of theory of Feminism in a postmodern society. Her book “engages with post-modernity as a space for social change and political transformation.” McRobbie assesses the contribution of Susan Sontag, Walter Benjamin, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and examines the youth, media, postmodernity and popular culture.

**POP CULTURE AND YOUNG AUDIENCE**

Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel in the book article “The Young Audience” notice the growth of the media and the change in the ‘teenage’ adolescent attitudes. They ask us to pay attention to the popular entertainment for young people, and deal with the “complex interaction between the attitudes of the young and what is provided for their consumption—by the world of commercial entertainments” (Ed. John Storey 2009:45). Thus,
it is suitable for this chapter to explore Shakespeare and Popular Culture, giving the six examples of the four films and the two pop music adaptations of Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Romeo & Juliet*, the legendary story of star-crossed teen lovers. (1) Film Director Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins’ musical film *West Side Story* (1961) transforms the background to be on ethnic immigrants’ racial struggle in America in the 1960s. (2) Director Franco Zeffirelli’s film *Romeo & Juliet* (1968) starring Olivia Hussey and Leonard Whiting, the teenagers’ natural chemistry adds freshness to Shakespeare’s tragedy. (3) Director Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) (starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes) is on spectacle and hyper-reality. (4) Italian Director Carlo Carlei’s *Romeo & Juliet* (2013) comparatively new film has a classic aroma. Moreover, (5) Taylor Swift’s MV song “Love Story” modernizes Shakespeare by pop music. Furthermore, (6) the “Late Late Show with James Corden” performing the soundtrack with Emily Blunt, covering 14 songs, 7 sets, one take, is humorous and interesting. In addition, in the Notes giving the lyrics of the 20 pop songs related to *Romeo & Juliet* have contemporary meanings.

This monograph chapter explores the significance of Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* adapted and represented in the films and pop music. Why should we change our attention from Shakespeare’s sixteenth century plays to the connection between Shakespeare and popular culture? First, we live nowadays in the twenty-first century and enjoy the pop music in the era with popular culture. Secondly, we make research on liveness of theater performance studies and film studies, and also concern about the populace (young) people’s popular interests. Thirdly, films and performing arts, such as pop music and photography, have already broken the boundary between the leisure entertainment and the academic scholarship. Thus, we see the importance of doing Shakespeare research in the area of popular culture.

**Literature Reviews**

As Shakespeare is omnipresent in popular culture; for example, films, pop music, musicals, television, advertisements, radio, fiction, comic books, children’s books, toys, computer games, stage performances, etc., it is important for us to explore Shakespearean adaptation or allusion in popular culture. Before commenting on the five cases of the four films and Taylor Swift’s pop song “Love Story”, this chapter addresses some relevant works in the field, such as Douglas Lanier’s book
It’s obvious that Shakespeare is everywhere in popular culture. Movies, television, radio, pulp fiction, musicals, pop music, children’s books, advertisements, comic books, toys, computer games, pornography: nearly every imaginable category of contemporary pop culture features examples of Shakespearian allusion or adaptation. (2002:3).

Lanier’s argument strengthens the point of this chapter on exploring Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* represented in film and pop music. Moreover, Marjorie Garber in the Department of English at Harvard University in her book chapter “Romeo and Juliet: The Untimeliness of Youth” in *Shakespeare and Modern Culture* begins with discussion the film *Shakespeare in Love* (screenplay writers: Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard). It connects Shakespeare’s secret muse who inspires him with writing Juliet’s speech in the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*: “My bounty is as boundless as the sea, / My love as deep” (2.1.175–76), and later the nightingale-and-lark aubade (Act 3, Scene 5).

But Garber wonders “perhaps of more central interest, in the interactions between Shakespeare and modern culture, is the question of how “Romeo and Juliet” became the unquestioned modern cultural shorthand for romantic love” (2009:35). This can make us think about the theme of romantic love in the films and the pop song lyrics in pop music echoing later in this chapter in the aspect of popular culture.

**Pop Music**

In terms of pop music, Adam Hansen in *Shakespeare and Popular Music* covers the types of popular music, from Hip-Hop, Jazz, Country, Folk and the mainstream pop. Hansen analyzes the pop song lyrics in the 1960s and compares the Beatles and the Bard, acknowledging the work of Douglas Lanier, Wes Folkerth and Stephen Buhler. Hansen makes use of David Lindley’ work on ballads and Bruce Smith’s notions of “acoustic
landscapes” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and also deploys Theodor Adorno’s concept of “fragmentation and repetition” to the characteristics of pop music.

AUTHENTICITY AND APPROPRIATION

Representing Shakespeare by adaptation, and considering the questions of authenticity and appropriation are the contemporary trends. Balz Engler in the journal article “On Gottfried Keller’s A Village Romeo and Juliet and Shakespeare Adaptation in General” published by Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation acknowledges the notions of adaptation by the works of Linda Hutcheon (2006), Hutcheon and O’Flynn (2013), Julie Sanders (2005), Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin (2014). Daniel Fischlin’s “A Note on Adaptation of Romeo and Juliet” (2007) indicates that both Shakespeare and Keller “draw on a shared myth” and their versions contain “all kinds of artifacts” (2008:1). Moreover, Peter Holland indicates in the book chapter “Shakespeare Abbreviated” in Shakespeare and Popular Culture edited by Robert Shaughnessy, “The Animated Tales seek to present Shakespeare, to educate their audience into an appreciation and love of Shakespeare, out of a conviction of Shakespeare as a cultural artifact available to all, not restricted to a narrowly defined social or educated class nor to a narrowly defined form of performance” (2007:44). This chapter also supports representing or adapting or even appropriating Shakespeare by films and pop music in popular culture to make Shakespeare popular for all.

SHAKESPEARE ALSO AS A METHODOLOGY

We can take Shakespeare not merely as a topic, but also as a methodology. Alexa Huang (Alexa Alice Joubin) in the journal article “Global Shakespeare as Methodology” published by Shakespeare: Journal of the British Shakespeare Association suggests that seeing global Shakespeare as a methodology “rather than appendages of colonialism, as political rhetoric, or as centerpieces in a display of exotic cultures” (2013:273). Performing global Shakespeare through films, stage performances, festivals, I think, also aided by pop music, can make cultural fluidity to travel from the native habitat to transcend the limitation.
THEORIES OF POPULAR CULTURE AND CULTURAL THEORY

Before exploring Shakespeare and popular culture, let us understand what is culture and popular culture. Giving the three categories in the definition of culture, first, the ‘ideal,’ second, the ‘documentary,’ third, the ‘social,’ explaining by the example of the play Antigone written by Sophocles, Raymond Williams in the book article “The Analysis of Culture” in the book Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader (edited by John Storey) analyzes culture. Borrowing William’s analysis of culture, I think that one of the reasons of connecting Shakespeare with popular culture (or called pop culture) is that, even the traditional culture of a society, as William said, “always tend to correspond to its contemporary system of interests and values” (2009:39). Thus, with the crisis of young college students’ ignorance of Shakespeare’s plays and poetry, facing the tradition of Shakespearean research, we need to change to correspond to contemporary readers’ popular interests and interpret Shakespeare’s plays according to the values nowadays in the rise of popular culture.

Popular culture or mass culture, used interchangeably, the former, culture “made by the people,” and the latter, culture “imposed on the people.” Richard Halpern defines mass culture as “a set of global conditions reorganizing the totality of cultural production and consumption in modern culture rather than a specific class culture” (1997:54). I think that Halpern means historically accumulated massification reorganizes different class cultures. Therefore, Shakespeare’s plays exemplified Romeo and Juliet can be represented by popular culture for the mass in different classes to be more accessible, easier, and popular.

Canon, Kitsch, Simulacra, Classics, Representation

In Shakespearean studies, Richard Burt’s edited book Shakespeare After Mass Media argues that Shakespeare in mass media, especially film, video and television, is the “hottest, fastest growth research agenda” (2016 Book Introduction). Film, pop music video and TV drama opera are in the category of the “cultural industry” as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in ideologies critiques called (1972, 2002) or the “creative industry” or the “cultural creative industry” as other scholars call nowadays in England, Australia, New Zealand, the U.S. Korea, Japan and Taiwan.
Within the six examples above, the chapter mainly interprets the three examples: (1) Film Director Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* (starred by Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes), (2) Italian Director Carlo Carlei’s *Romeo & Juliet (2013)*, and (3) pop music in Taylor Swift’s music video “Love Story.” I argue that Shakespeare needs popular cultural elements to innovate and attract contemporary audiences.

(1) The Musical Film West Side Story on Race

Director Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins’ *West Side Story* (1961) is a successful musical film inspired from Shakespeare’s play *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*. This musical film transforms the background to be on ethnic immigrants’ racial struggle, a gang rivalry of street teenagers between the Jets (the white gang) vs. the Sharks (consisted of Puerto Rico immigrants) in New York City in America in the 1960s (Fig. 2.1).

The musical film with the book by Arthur Laurents, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, and music by Leonard Bernstein. In *West Side Story*, the

![Fig. 2.1 Adapting from Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, West Side Story (1961) contains the race conflicts. (Photo: Courtesy of Aflo Co., Ltd.)](image-url)
musical film changes the protagonists’ names in Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* to be Tony and Maria, and adds the issues on race, teenager struggle, immigration problems, and cultural shock.

In the famous balcony scene, the New York musical adaptation did a bravo theme song “Tonight” (published in 1956), a duet sung by Tony and Maria (Fig. 2.2). The music is composed and written by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. The lyrics, such as “see you”, are realistic, in physical action, they touch each other. In light design, with dim streetlight, to show love via music with the 1960s style music. Stephen M. Buhler’s book article “Reviving Juliet, Repackaging Romeo: Transformations of Character in Pop and Post-Pop Music” in the book *Shakespeare After Mass Media* examines the musical film *West Side Story*. Buhler indicates that this film presents the identification with youth and the subculture attributes “through music” (2002:243). Therefore, we can feel the young lover’s love through music and understand the importance of choosing the title leads.

Fig. 2.2 The musical film *West Side Story* (1961) was directed by Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins. Natalie Wood and Richard Beymer star in this film. The two protagonists sing the theme song “Tonight.” (Photo: Courtesy of Aflo Co., Ltd.)
(2) *Film Director Franco Zeffirelli’s Romeo & Juliet (1968)*

*Stars the Teenagers’ Chemistry Cast to Add Freshness*

Director Franco Zeffirelli’s awesome enthusiastic engaging in a worldwide search for the suitable teenage actors to play the two title roles and great choice of Olivia Hussey (16 years old) as Juliet, and Leonard Whiting (17 years old) as Romeo at that time, makes the movie a huge hit with young viewers. Beautiful Hussey and Handsome Whiting’s natural chemistry adds charming freshness to Shakespeare’s sad and tragic love story (Fig. 2.3). Director Franco Zeffirelli is smart to hide the two teenager actors’ weakness by trimming Shakespeare’s long speech lines, and show their strength by emphasizing reaction shots. Even *Rotten Tomatoes* gave good positive reviews including “the solid leads” and “the arresting visuals” make Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet* “the definitive cinematic adaptation of the play.”

In the YouTube, this music video put the important moments in the scenes from *Romeo and Juliet (1968)* with the song “What is a Youth.” The impact of Film Director Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet (1968)* film

![Romeo and Juliet](image.png)

**Fig. 2.3** *Romeo and Juliet.* Olivia Hussey as Juliet, and Leonard Whiting as Romeo makes the movie a huge hit and becomes a classic. (Photo: Courtesy of Aflo Co., Ltd.)
version is so influential in the popular culture, not only in films and pop music, but also in comic books and Manga. D. Lanier in the journal paper “Recent Shakespeare Adaptation and the Mutations of Cultural Capital” (2010) in *Shakespeare Studies* finds Igarashi Yluniko’s Manga Classics *Romeo and Juliet* from UDON Entertainment is indebted to Film Director Zeffirelli’s film in terms of costume and setting.

(3) Directed Baz Luhrmann’s Film *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) on Postmodern Spectacles and Hyper-Reality

Though most viewers feel Film Director Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* postmodern version audacious (Lehmann 2001:189; Welsh 1997:152), Luhrmann’s adaptation can fully reflect Shakespeare in popular culture epitomized in film as a cultural product in the Age of Media (Fig. 2.4). As Peter S. Donaldson’s book article “‘In Fair Verona’: Media, Spectacle, and Performance in William Shakespeare’s *Romeo + Juliet*” discusses mass media, advertising, religious and queer kitsch, and finds Film Director Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 adaptation version as Shakespeare’s play converged in the Age of Media. Donaldson reads Verona filmed by Luhrmann as surreal, the boundary between the events and their replications are interrelated in the ubiquitous media as Guy Debord called the regime of “the Spectacle” where fetished images replace reality, and other theorists call hyper-reality (Burt 2002:9) (Fig. 2.5).

*Postmodern Culture by Digital Technology*

No doubt, Baz Luhrmann’s film *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* (1996) contains postmodern² culture by digital technology. Just as W. B. Worthen also indicates in the book article “Performing Shakespeare in Digital Culture” that:

> Not only is our access to Shakespearean drama mediated by digital technology (even in live performance, where computers operate most theatre systems), our imagination of Shakespearean drama is shaped by the forms and moods of digital culture: the “penny dreadfuls” of Julie Taymor’s *Titus*, Ethan Hawke’s editing and re-editing of his pixelated experience in Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet*, the animated clouds in the storm scene of Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet*, to say nothing of the thoroughgoing impact of digital editing in all three films (2007:228).
Fig. 2.4  *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) contains postmodern collage, spectacles and hyper-reality. (Photo: Courtesy of 20th Century Fox/Photofest)
The cinematography of Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* imbues the film with the tempestuous storm, eye-catching, and postmodern collage and pastiche. Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* represents Shakespeare by digital technology in digital culture.

Although many viewers enjoy seeing the 1996 movie by Director Baz Luhrmann’s visual gorgeous yet radical script adaptation version, C. Lehmann in the journal paper “Strictly Shakespeare? Dead Letters, Ghostly Fathers, and the Cultural Pathology of Authorship in Baz Luhrmann’s William Shakespeare’s Romeo +Juliet” in Shakespeare Quarterly comments that Film Director Baz Luhrmann’s camera “fails to commodify and consume Shakespeare’s verse” and “at the Capulet ball, Luhrmann playfully converts Juliet into Romeo’s “bright angel” (Fig. 2.6).

Director Baz Luhrmann’s adaptation film version Romeo & Juliet is full of spectacles as Lehmann indicates: “True to postmodern form, Luhrmann introduces us to William Shakespeare’s *Romeo + Juliet* in a
manner wholly attuned to a ‘consumers’ appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudo-events and ‘spectacles’” (2001:192).

To realize Director Baz Luhrmann’s film *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) in the contemporary system of interests and values, we can take the reference of the interviews and the related papers. Robert Knope in the book article “Shakespeare in the Cinema: A Film Directors’ Symposium” in *Theater and Film: A Comparative Anthology* keeps the record of the interviews with the eight famous directors, including Peter Brook, Sir Peter Hall, Richard Loncraine, Baz Luhrmann, Trevor Nunn, Oliver Parker, Roman Polanski, Franco Zeffirelli who have ever directed film on Shakespeare’s plays. Among them, I’d like to take Director Baz Luhrmann’s film *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) starring by Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes, for my case studies to explore Shakespeare and popular culture in terms of film (Figs. 2.7 and 2.8).

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**Fig. 2.6** Director Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) playfully converts Juliet into Romeo’s “bright white beautiful angel.” (Photo: Courtesy of 20th Century Fox/Photofest)
Director Baz Luhrmann’s Philosophy

To answer Gary Crowdus’ question: “What is your own philosophy or strategy for making cuts, for updating antiquarian or obscure words, or for rewriting or rearranging scenes?” Director Baz Luhrmann answers:

Our philosophy in adapting Romeo and Juliet for the screen was to reveal Shakespeare’s lyrical, romantic, sweet, sexy, musical, violent, rude, rough, rowdy, rambunctious storytelling through his richly invented language. Consequently, our specific strategy was to avoid changing or adding words. We were adamant that we should maintain the colour and taste of the actual words even to the extent of the “thee” and “thou” (Knope 2005:268). Director Luhrmann employs colorful images to express Shakespeare’s language.

The themes in Shakespeare are not only universal, but also multicultural. As Dennis Kennedy in the Foreword “The Future is Fusion” in Shakespeare in Culture notes that:

Fig. 2.7  Romeo and Juliet (1996). Romeo (plays by Leonardo DiCaprio) loves Juliet at the first sight. (Photo: Courtesy of 20th Century Fox/Photofest)
In English, Baz Luhrman’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* (USA, 1996) set a widely seen marker for a multicultural approach, so much so that Chee Kong Cheah’s *Chicken Rice War* (Singapore, 2000, in English and Chinese) uses the earlier film as a frame for its own version of the play set among the “hawker food” stalls of Singapore (2012a, b:10).

The impact of Baz Luhrman’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* is so influential not only in the English world, but also in Asia, as a multicultural approach to theater.

From multi-culture to popular culture, to echo to my focus on Shakespeare in film and pop music in the popular culture, Director Baz Luhrmann also points out the importance (I think for both Shakespeare at his time and for us nowadays) of using popular song (pop music) to serve the ultimate goal of aiding Shakespeare’s strong storytelling (Knope 2005:269). To sum up, Director Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* (1996)
is invigorating full of energy to make people still feel fresh about Shakespeare’s play.

**Italian Film Director Carlo Carlei’s Romeo & Juliet (2013), Classical Juxtaposition with La Pietà, the Sculpture by Michelangelo**

After the popular movie hits as Franco Zeffirelli’s 1968 film with the super classical 16-year-old teenage beauty Olivia Hussey as Juliet, Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 film with Leonardo Dicaprio as Romeo in the spectacle of images, and the 2011 animation film with garden Gnomes, how can one transcend the previous masterpieces to make the viewers still feel new and splendid? In 2013, Italian Film Director Carlo Carlei’s *Romeo & Juliet (2013)* gave a try to star Douglas Booth as Romeo and Hailee Steinfeld as Juliet (Fig. 2.9). Both title leads I think are cute and also including the fast-rising stars in the cast, such as Ed Westwick and Paul Giamatti. Besides, Carlei’s film script gets Julian Fellowes who has done *Downtown Abbey* successfully to adapt Shakespeare’s play into the film script.

*My Comments* La Pietà

Director Carlei’s film has merits, in my perspective, in representing the grandiose nobles’ houses like a palace (Fig. 2.10). The historical sixteenth century classical milieu is presented by the long deep shots, gorgeous costumes, in the shining crystal decoration with the sponsorship of Swarovski, embellishments of sculptures, paintings, arts, architectures, and gardens. Besides, the whole film actions and camera shots flow to tell the story with speed. Moreover, Director Carlo Carlei’s filmic shooting cooperated with Julian Fellowes’ script adaptation, though follow Shakespeare’s play, yet some details are different from Shakespeare’s original play. For example, Director Carlei in his film changes to let Juliet wake up at the moment when Romeo just drinks the poison drug to say “Thus with a kiss I die” (Act V. Scene III, Line 120). In my view, this design in this film version along with the messenger’s failure of delivering Friar Laurence’s letter to Romeo earlier in time all contribute to make the movie viewers feel more regrets about God’s arrangement, time and coincidences. Furthermore, Director Carlei’s camera shot is unique to picturesque frame Juliet after suicide by using Romeo’s dagger. Juliet says:
Fig. 2.9 Italian Film Director Carlo Carlei’s *Romeo & Juliet* (2013) stars Douglas Booth as Romeo and Hailee Steinfeld as Juliet. (Photo: Courtesy of Relativity Media/Photofest)
“Yea, noise? Then I'll be brief. O happy dagger!
[Snatching Romeo's dagger]
This is thy sheath; [stabs herself]; there rust, and let me die.
[Falls on Romeo's body and dies.] (Act V. Scene III, Lines 167–170)

Again, Director Carlo Carlei's filmic shooting changes. Instead of abiding by Shakespeare's line description “Falls on Romeo’s body, and dies” (Act V. Scene III, Line 170), I find that Director Carlei employs his cinematic camera to let Juliet embrace Romeo in her arms. And that camera frame, in my observation, is similar to the image of Saint Mother Maria in the posture of painfully losing her beloved dead son Jesus and holding him in *La Pietà*, the sculpture by Michelangelo and in the religious painting. In Carlei's film camera, the background with the painting of Cupid and angels flying in the tomb vault to present this tragedy as if a memorable romantic drama painting which makes not only Friar Laurence in this play who sees this tragic sight cry, but also the viewers weep.
COMPARISON AND COMMENTARY ON SHAKESPReAN FILMS

In a comparison of the four films above, although I like this classical and lyrical film, however, Carlei’s stiff film (2013) version does not receive more positive reviews than Luhrmann’s postmodern spectacles burst out (1996) version. In terms of acting and leads cooperation, Romeo and Juliet’s first passionate love cannot be plentifully expressed by Douglas Booth and Hailee Steinfeld’s fine combination, I think, compared with Franco Zeffirelli’s film (1968) starring Leonard Whiting and beautiful Olivia Hussey’s innocent passion; and Baz Luhrmann’s (1996) film starring Leonardo Dicaprio and Claire Danes’s wildfire love. Therefore, we expect another vital powerful interpretation of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet in the future while we listen to the pop songs that relate to Shakespeare’s Romeo & Juliet in popular culture.4

SHAKESPEARE AND POP MUSIC

(5) Taylor Swift’s Pop Music “Love Story”5

In Pop culture, McRobbie notices that (young) women are now “experiencing the full force of a backlash led by the emergent ‘new right’ and moral majority movements” (1994:157). I discover the notion of “changing modes of femininity” (mentioned in the book chapter “Shut Up and Dance: Youth Culture and Changing Modes of Femininity” written by Angela McRobbie) is similar and still suitable for describing the circumstance of the teenager subculture and the star icons today, such as Taylor Swift in her song “Love Story.” McRobbie’s use of the phrase “changing modes of femininity” means, “How fluid gender practices and meanings structures are” (1994:157). This contemporary love song is shot in the university campus to mirror Shakespeare’s tragedy Romeo and Juliet in the seventeenth century in a classical castle milieu, but imbues with the new fashion popular culture romantic atmosphere.

The setting changes to be in the contemporary era in the university campus, grass, young college students’ daily life studying and strolling in the campus. The balcony scene changes to let Taylor Swift wear as if classical white long Victorian gown, singing the solo (Soprano) about both Shakespeare’s Juliet’s voice and Swift’s contemporary ideas toward love.
Intertextuality of Literature and Pop Music

In the literature tradition of the canons and the classics, the signification and representation of Shakespeare’s plays, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, may change variously nowadays. Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* in the balcony scene (Act 2 Scene 2), Juliet’s monologues express her regret about the feud between her family The Capulet and Romeo’s family The Montague, and her naïve longing: Here is the song example of Franco Zeffirelli’s film to illustrate Romeo’s listening to Juliet’s young innocent wish.

Juliet: ‘Tis but thy name that is my enemy;
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What’s Montague? It is nor hand nor foot,
Nor arm nor face, [nor any other part]
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What’s in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other word would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call’d,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
And for thy name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself. (II. ii. 38–48)

Pop music transforms Shakespeare’s stage lines into Swift’s song lyrics. As Raymond William indicates, in the “selective tradition,” some change break or re-draw existing lines as a “radical kind of contemporary change” (2009:39). In the contemporary change epitomized in pop music in popular culture, adapting from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Taylor Swift’s pop song “Love Story” is also full of girls’ dream about romantic love. In the lyrics below:

We were both young when I first saw you.
I close my eyes and the flashback starts I’m standing here
On a balcony in summer air.

Literature Intertextuality

Taylor Swift put the famous balcony scene (Act Two Scene 2) in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* into her song “Love Story.” She retells Romeo and Juliet’s love encountering difficulties:
Taylor Swift not only puts Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet*’s plot in her lyrics, but also with the literature intertextuality refers to American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *Scarlet Letter* with the letter “A” which represents the novel female protagonist Hester’s sin and adultery, and here symbolizes the forbidden love between Romeo and Juliet. Eventually Swift rewrites Shakespeare’s tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* to be a happy ending in her pop music love song with the lyrics below:

Marry me, Juliet
You’ll never have to be alone
I love you and that’s all I really know
I talked to your dad, go pick out a white dress
It’s a love story, baby just say yes.

Like a fairy tale, Shakespeare’s tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* in the seventeenth century transforms into a romantic love story shot in the Youtube film with a happy ending in the contemporary pop music video. In popular culture, the young audience and the viewers may appreciate Shakespeare’s tragedy to be transformed into romance with happy ending like a wedding with girl’s white dress.

Good Girl & White Authenticity
Taylor Swift’s pop songs not only invoke her fans’ fantasy about the image of “good girl”, but also the controversy over “white authenticity.” Rachel E. Dubrofsky in the journal paper “A Vernacular of Surveillance: Taylor Swift and Miley Cyrus Perform White Authenticity” examines Taylor Swift’s music video “Shake it Off” and Miley Cyrus’s video “We Can’t Stop” to argue “self-reflexivity marks their performing behavior as distinct from their authentic self” (2016:184). To connect Shakespeare and popular culture, in terms of critical race studies and feminist media studies, I think that white authenticity exists in pop music and films even under the surveillance of society, the male gaze, and the voyeurism of camera. Moreover, in the connection of Shakespeare with pop culture and pop music, we can associate the lyrics in Cyrus’ “We Can’t Stop”—“It’s our party we can love who we want”—to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* in
which teenagers met in the dance party and wanted to do what they want and love whom they desire.

*Love Song in the Balcony Scene*

Though most adaptations keep Shakespeare’s original monologues and dialogues, the music and scene design (garden, climbing the balcony, trees, flowers, mise-en-scène, camera shooting, framing, shots, tunes, lyrics, etc.) are different to represent distinctive specific characteristics. For instance, in a comparison between Taylor Swift’s “Love Story,” in the French musical *Roméo et Juliette* (presented by Géraro Louvin), the love song “Le Balcony” is romantic, and the lyrics are poetic. Furthermore, the love song in the balcony scene is so famous that every films, musicals, and even the pop music and the fictitious balcony in the architecture building wall in Verona in Italy (where Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* sets the place of the story was happened) has been built to attract the tourists in the real world.

*Song Reprise and Set Design*

Many pop songs in popular music adapt from Shakespeare’s canonic monologues and dialogues into song lyrics. In *West Side Story*, there is a stop in the middle of the song, which I guess to symbolize the obstacles between the lovers. The lyrics are written by Stephen Joshua Sondheim. In *West Side Story*, in the song “America,” the men and the women of the immigrants express their different attitudes toward America. Reprise, repeat to sing twice, is often used in pop songs, yet in different tones and emotions. Reprise in the song “Tonight” uses a motif to reconstruct the things. The women are waiting for their lovers tonight, which is showed by a vocal quartet quartette of the four lovers (2 couples) singers. In set design, the space, compared with the balcony scene in the French musical *Roméo et Juliette* and Taylor Swift’s MV song, the escape stairs in NYC building in the musical film *West Side Story* is narrower and realistic.

*Identification in Taylor Swift’s “Love Story”*

To analyze Taylor Alison Swift’s songs, we can take the reference of her fans’ reactions and Adriane Brown’s comments in the journal paper “She Isn’t Whoring Herself Out Like A Lot of Other Girls We See”: Identification and “Authentic” American Girlhood on Taylor Swift Fan Forums.” Brown examines the two websites forum sections to explore Taylor Swift’s fandom. Brown indicates that although Swift’s fans assert they “know” her
through her music and media persona, however, Swift’s “positing as an 
“authentic” American girl subject is wholly tied to her status as a white, 
middle-class, heterosexual, normatively feminine girl” “and questions her 
fans’ insistence that she is a ‘good’ girl” (2012:161). I agree with Brown’s 
view and further argue that since the construction of femininity in the 
1990s in the U.S., the mainstream culture propelled by media are replete 
with the fragments of ‘information’ and even reconstruction of ‘fake news’ 
about the fans’ fantasies of the images of their “ideal” “dreamlike” favorite 
popular music stars, film superstars, and TV celebrities.

We can notice Taylor Swift’s change—some of Swift’s love song lyrics 
change from the earliest first stage of country music, such as the albums 
“Taylor Swift” and “Fearless.” The early songs show her innocent good 
girl image. Later her style expands and transforms into “Speak Now” and 
“Red” with more Taylor Swift style. Recently she has released more pop 
music albums in “1989” and “Reputation.” Taylor Swift’s daring attitude 
“no need to mind what others say” in the song “Shake Off” gets 27 mil-
ion visibility in YouTube. ‘It even connects to Swift’s many lovers in the 
songs, including “Dear John,” “We are never getting back together,” “I 
knew you were trouble,”” and so on. After all, how can the image of a 
good white, middle-class blonde beautiful girl without sex?

Icon, Femininity, and Romance

To explore Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet represented in the youth cul-
ture and pop music, giving the example of Taylor Swift’s “Love Story”, I 
relate the fans’ fantasy about the good girl star icon image to the feminist 
academics’ expectation about femininity. However, I also doubt with self-
reflexivity as Angela McRobbie in the book chapter “Shut Up and Dance: 
Youth Culture and Changing Modes of Femininity” in her book 
Postmodernism and Popular Culture questions: If feminist academics (see, 
for instance, Radway 1984; Modleski 1982) have done a great deal to 
restore the status of romance by reclaiming it as a hidden pleasure of femi-
ninity, how historically specific is this pleasure? Do girls now simply have 
to look elsewhere for romantic narratives? Or do they no longer need 
them? Do these narratives no longer serve a useful as well as a pleasurable 
function? I agree with McRobbie, my feeling is that romance has indeed 
been dislodged from its place of cultural pre-eminence (McRobbie 
1994:167).

The fans project their fantasy and feelings unto their star icons to fill in 
the pleasure and the gaze. That is, in the song lyrics they search for the
romantic narratives as the previous old generation look for the romance in Shakespeare’s tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*. In my view, the subculture of the teenager and the youth culture is the epitome of the commercial cultural products provided by the media. Social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, Line, WeChat, and so on, form the network of communication, and the raw materials for chatting show the youth spirit in this Age of Media.

**6) “The Late Late Show with James Corden”: ‘Romeo and Juliet’ with Emily Blunt**

In the Age of Media, the U. K. TV Station Program “The Late Late Show with James Corden” online in Youtube broadcasts the soundtrack to ‘Romeo and Juliet’ with Emily Blunt. There are 14 Songs, 7 Sets, One take. It is humorous and fascinating to link the crucial moments of the plot in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Moreover, in the pop song “A Day to Remember—You Had Me at Hello,” the lyrics are like foreshadowing Romeo and Juliet’s tragic love story: “I’m missing you so much, I’ll see you die tonight.”

**Timeline in Shakespeare’s Play**

Shakespeare propels the timeline in this play to make all the events happen within the five days. On Sunday morning, Romeo has lovesick for Rosaline who rejects him. On the same Sunday evening, Shakespeare sets the young teenager lover’s encounter at the party, Romeo after seeing beautiful Juliet; he forgets Rosaline and immediately changes to love Juliet. Romeo and Juliet fall in love at the first sight. On Sunday night, in the balcony scene they swear love to each other and decide to get married. The next day on Monday early afternoon, rapidly they are married by Friar Laurence, with the marriage ceremony witnessed by Juliet’s old nanny Nurse. Monday late afternoon Tybalt is killed. Monday early evening Romeo fights to kill Tybalt to revenge for Mercutio. On Monday night, Prince of Verona banishes Romeo from Verona. On Monday night, Romeo (by Juliet’s Nurse’s help) climbs into Juliet’s bedchamber as Juliet’s husband to spend the night together. On Tuesday morning, Juliet refuses her father’s will to marry Count Paris. On Tuesday afternoon, Juliet “agrees” to marry Paris after taking Friar Laurence’s advice. On Tuesday night, Juliet takes the poison to have a fake death. Due to the messenger’s coincident mistake of failing to deliver Friar Laurence’s letter to Romeo in time, Romeo learns Juliet’s death, decides to return to Verona to see her
dead body, and plans to commit suicide. On Thursday evening, Romeo sees Juliet’s body in her coffin. Paris challenges Romeo to fight and Paris is dead. Romeo takes the poison just as Juliet is about to awake. Juliet commits suicide by Romeo’s dagger. On Thursday evening the Montague and the Capulet families, both losing their only child, finally end their feuds to end this tragedy. Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet* begins on Sunday morning and ends on the following Thursday evening, within 5 days.

Shakespeare designs everything all of the action, events to begin, rise up to the climax, falling down to denouncement to end within 5 days from Sunday to Thursday. Romeo and Juliet’s fast falling in love and making love is somehow similar to the fast food nightclub one-night stand in the current society.

**Related Pop Songs**

Many pop songs can support my points. Ariana Grande—“Right There” ft. Big Sean is a good example. This pop music song is highly related to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. It has the ball dance party. There are the Juliet-like and Romeo-like protagonists in the Renaissance period princess and prince costumes among the crowd, and the balcony scene. It adds the contemporary swimming pool scene with the water ballet girls performing in the swimming pool. Numerous pop songs can be given to strengthen the argument of the importance of renovating and innovating Shakespeare by popular culture such as pop songs.

**Conclusion**

In the contemporary popular culture, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is also restaged to include the race problem in the theater performing arts. For example, in 2018, there is the RSC version *Romeo and Juliet: Celebrating Diversity*, which shows the issue of race by assigning the role of Romeo to be played by the black actor Bally Gill and the role of Juliet to be played by the white actress Karen Fishwick. Moreover, this 2018 RSC Erica Whyman’s production also uses the contemporary costume and props with the minimalism setting design. Let the cast wear modern casual clothes, such as Juliet in her modern sleeping sports short pants with the comforters barefoot on her bed, others in sneakers or barefoot, etc. The audience members feel close to their contemporary daily lives. In the
interview by DESLblitz, Gill and Fishwick talk about diversity in theatre and playing such iconic roles on stage to the viewers.\(^8\)

I suggest that we can do research and teach Shakespeare’s plays related to popular culture in the Age of Media by using films, pop music and YouTube. C. Desmet describes the benefits of using YouTube to teach Shakespeare in the journal paper “Teaching Shakespeare with YouTube.” According to Desmet, “the ease of repetition (Replay is only a click away) coupled with the length limitations imposed by YouTube focus viewers’ attention sharply and thus promote close analysis” (2009:65). It is effective and convenient for us to teach Shakespeare by using popular films, pop music, and YouTube for free. Especially during the peak of COVID-19, the theater performances are all stopped. So we are encouraged to watch the performances online.

Furthermore, as I argue that maintaining Shakespearean research as an everlasting research topic by way of alive popular culture to keep the contemporary viewers’ interests. As the book Orson Wells, Shakespeare, and Popular Culture written by Michael Anderegg indicates:

What made the culture of the 19th century America—including the plays of Shakespeare—at all “popular” was the interaction between production and reception, actor and audience, speaker and listener. (1999:165)

Shakespeare can be popular not just in the past, but also nowadays in the contemporary twenty-first century to the whole world. After Shakespeare had passed away for more than 400 years, Shakespeare’s plays and poetry have become the public intellectual property to be able to be used and adapted for free without the limitation of the Intellectual Property Law. All forms of mass communication in the Age of Media, including film, pop music, radio, newspapers, television, magazines, recordings, etc. are useful channels for us to make Shakespeare more easily accessible for the readers, theatergoers, and viewers in popular culture.

Respond to Lanier in Shakespeare \& Modern Popular Culture who indicates that Shakespeare “symbolizes high art in general, the distinction between ‘Shakespeare’ and ‘popular culture’ epitomizes one of the great divides in the culture of the last century, the division between highbrow and lowbrow” (2002:3). However, with times’ change and progress, nowadays we can interpret the recent cases of Shakespearean adaptation, allusion, inspiration, or radical deconstruction in popular culture, not only for the few elite high class intellectuals to understand, but also for all to enjoy
Shakespeare at least by the significant and entertaining films and nice pleasant pop music.

Romeo and Juliet have become the lovers as love paradigm. As Marvin Carlson points out in the book article “Daniel Mesguich and Intercultural Shakespeare” that theater director Daniel Mesguich’s *Romeo and Juliet* (Paris, 1985) put intertextuality as a major principle to organize the interpretation. And the script adapter Gervais Robin in a program note spoke of the universality of Shakespeare’s original story. Robin suggests that Romeo and Juliet have become “paradigmatic loves” “haunt our theatres, our films, our books” (Carlson 1993:217). The universality of paradigmatic love between Romeo and Juliet also haunts in pop culture and pop music.

As Garber finds the untimely love of Romeo and Juliet is so impressionistic, “so poignant, so “modern”, and so timely” due to the “youth culture” (2009:61); remembering Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel also figure out the teenage sub-culture and media in “The Young Audience,” this chapter seeks to contribute to something timely to the study of popular Shakespeare in the theoretical perspective of cultural theory and popular culture, acknowledging directly related scholarships works, interpreting Italian Film Director Carlo Carlei’s recent film *Romeo & Juliet* (2013) and Shakespeare in pop music, focusing on Taylor Swift’s MV “Love Story” (2009). Translocal interdisciplinary combination areas of films and pop songs by focusing on Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* shown in pop culture, this chapter offers the insight of comparison with Michelangelo’s *La Pietà* in the film and analyzing the contemporary “Love Story” of Taylor Swift among the twenty pop music songs whose lyrics are inspired from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*.

**Notes**

1. *Romeo and Juliet* (1968)—What Is A Youth (Music Video) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCQMlyXMRJE
2. Jameson, “Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” 74.
3. Recent Indian Adaptation Film https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYnJq-AcKJE

This 2014 Indian musical comedy film *Romeo and Juliet* is full of Bollywood dance and singing style, which is extremely radically adapted or we shall say just inspired from Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*. So this Indian film is not included to be explored in this article. The
modern Indian Bollywood comic musical film stars by Jayam Ravi & Hansika is directed by Lakshman. In music design, D. Imman scores hummable & groovy songs for this relaxing film for entertainment in the pop culture. They twist Shakespeare’s tragedy into finding out what love is all about nowadays as a funny comedy in this cosmopolitan world.

4. The lyrics of Taylor Swift’s “Love Story” can be heard in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xg3vE8iE_E

5. That show clip can be found in the Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1obijnKoIQ

6. Modern Songs That Relate to Romeo & Juliet

(1) “Early Mourning—Alesana”

This song gives you the feeling about the end Romeo’s depression when he sees his beloved Juliet dying in the tomb belonging to the Capulets in the churchyard in Act V Scene III. The lyrics of the song are as follows:

“Why not one more night?
Our last kiss goodbye…
My sweet love tonight”
“I hope the stars
Still spell out your name…
Where you are…”
“Kiss my closing eyes.”

Through this song, the strong impact of the sorrowful emotion of Romeo can touch your heart.

(2) “Hey There Delilah-Plain White T’s”

This song describes the situation that the lovers in a distance cannot be together. It is similar to Romeo’s situation after his banish punishment, he and Juliet who are deeply in love but they cannot see each other.

“In the distance…
Close your eyes…
Oh. What’s to the meaning?”

(3) “I Miss You (Acoustic)-Incubus”
This song sounds like something the characters in Shakespeare’s play would be thinking, that kind of “AWWW love struck feeling throughout the play. The lyrics below:

“In your dream...
That I cannot explain...
I miss you….”

7. 15 Modern Songs That Relate to Romeo & Juliet

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-ujaN2vQw

(1) “Bad Blood”—Bastille
(2) “A Thousand Years”—Christina Perri
“I love you for a thousand years.
(3) “Red”—Taylor Swift
“Legend…let him be red”
(4) “They Don’t Know About Us”—One Direction
“They don’t know that I love you.”
(5) “Love Don’t Lie”—The Fray
(6) “The Distance”—Hot Chelle Rae
(7) “Alright”—Hot Chelle Rae
“You hear everything is great. But fade…”
“So would you come back in the middle of the night…
Everything is gonna to be alright.”
(8) “Storm Warning”—Hunter Hayes
(9) “Half a Heart”—One Direction
“I am half a heart if without you.”
(10) “Enchanted”—Taylor Swift
“All I say is that I am enchanted from you.”
(11) “Long Live”—Taylor Swift
(12) “I Won’t Give Up”—Jason Mraz
(13) “Sad Beautiful Tragic”—Taylor Swift
(14) “Thinking of You”—Katy Perry
(15) “If I Die Young”—The Band Perry

8. The Youtube film of DESLblitz can be seen https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tV1s3StTgco Retrieved on April 24, 2019.
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