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## "The Most Insistent Subject of Popular Music": An Exploration of Romeo and Juliet Music Adaptations and Their Expressions of Modern Cultural Issues

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“The Most Insistent Subject of Popular Music”:  
An Exploration of *Romeo and Juliet* Music Adaptations and  
Their Expressions of Modern Cultural Issues

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A thesis submitted to Bowling Green State University’s Department of English and Honors  
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### Abstract

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) has been persistently popular throughout history, especially in the modern production of popular music releases. People are often widely familiar with *Romeo and Juliet's* usage throughout music. However, the reasoning behind the adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* is relatively undiscussed. *Romeo and Juliet* is a leading symbol of tragic romance, an ever-present topic in popular music. *Romeo and Juliet's* canonical qualities lead music artists to adapt the original play since it permits access to an audience that is familiar with the contexts of Shakespeare's tragedy. This essay also provides a clear definition of "adaptation," requiring pieces to be extended engagements with a source text and provide their own interpretations of current cultural issues. As a result, the 1961 musical *West Side Story* and the 2017 studio album *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* are examined. *West Side Story* reinvents the original *Romeo and Juliet* to express the racism against Puerto Rican immigrants present in 1950s New York. *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* reverses the gender roles of the original play and establishes a feminist take on *Romeo and Juliet* that expresses the fluidity of female sexuality. *Romeo and Juliet* is adapted so often because it permits adaptors to assert their own stances on current social issues while preserving the canonical qualities of the play. Modern music artists continue to adapt *Romeo and Juliet* because it allows them to express current cultural tensions, making *Romeo and Juliet* music adaptations worthwhile reflections of issues that matter to artists and to their audiences.

Keywords: *Romeo and Juliet*, Popular Music, Popular Culture, Adaptation Studies, *West Side Story*, Halsey

## Introduction

Despite the original publication of his works taking place hundreds of years ago, William Shakespeare's plays continue to be omnipresent in today's culture, especially that of modern popular music. Popular culture and media as a whole embrace the subjects and themes of different Shakespeare writings, but various pieces of music have taken on a particular interest in the sense of tragedy established long ago in one of his most famous plays: *Romeo and Juliet*. Historically, *Romeo and Juliet* has provided many music artists with inspiration for their own musical creations. There is the French opera *Roméo et Juliette* by Charles Gounod and even the orchestral overture by Tchaikovsky of the play's original name, both created in the late 1800s. The 1957 Broadway musical *West Side Story* is adapted from the original *Romeo and Juliet* with an adaptation of its own, *West Side Story*, the musical film version released in 1961. Then, more recently, there are popular works such as Taylor Swift's *Love Story* and Halsey's *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* that were created throughout the 2000s. By focusing on some of the more modern aforementioned music adaptations, it is possible to examine Shakespeare's persistent popularity in current society and how modern music artists use *Romeo and Juliet* to express their own ideas within popular culture. This relationship between the original *Romeo and Juliet* and popular music is of particular interest to modern audiences because of the following statement made by R.S. White, a professor of English: "if some person were unaware of its existence as a play by Shakespeare, she or he could be forgiven for thinking that *Romeo and Juliet* is in essence a musical" since "the most insistent subject of popular music composed for the mass consumption of adolescents in modern times has been melancholy love" (183). The majority of popular music listeners will be unsurprised by the claim that popular music contains the insistent subject of melancholy love that Whites mentions. However, popular music is also a sector of

popular culture containing a plethora of *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations and direct engagements with Shakespeare's text. This claim may come as a surprise to modern day listeners and readers since the relationship between *Romeo and Juliet* and popular music adaptation is relatively unpaved in terms of scholarly discussion. With the examination of modern popular music adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* in comparison to the original contexts of Shakespeare's play, it is clear that *Romeo and Juliet* is the leading brand for tragic love hence its prevalence in the popular music of today.

William Shakespeare's original tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), takes place in 16th century Verona, Italy. The play focuses on the two lead characters Romeo Capulet and Juliet Montague, two members of opposing families. Even though Romeo and Juliet are raised to hate one another and their family lines, they inevitably fall in love after meeting at a masquerade ball hosted by Juliet's family, the Capulets. Knowing that both of their families will disapprove of their relationship, Romeo and Juliet contrive an elaborate plan to get married in secret by the authority of a cleric they both know, Friar Laurence. However, despite Romeo and Juliet's feelings for each other and the advice the friar gives them on avoiding the contestation of their families, their dueling families continue to despise one another. This continual hatred leads to the death of Romeo's close friend, Mercutio, and then the death of Juliet's cousin, Tybalt, at the hands of Romeo himself. Following Tybalt's death, Juliet is distraught, and her father wishes her to marry a suitor, Count Paris, in an effort to make her happy once again. Desperate to avoid being married off to Paris and save her relationship with Romeo, Juliet takes a sleeping potion at the suggestion of Friar Laurence. The intention was to convince the Capulet family that Juliet was dead so that she would not be able to marry Count Paris. Then, Juliet could run away with Romeo once she had awoken. However, Romeo inevitably discovers Juliet's sleeping body,

believing her to be dead after all. As a result, Romeo dies by suicide, unable to go on with his life without Juliet. Juliet eventually wakes up from the potion's effects and discovers her lover's deceased body next to her. Juliet then dies by suicide as well. This left the opposing Capulet and Montague families without a son and daughter, exposing the dangers that their feud brought upon each of their families.

The majority of present-day audiences are familiar with the plot, characters, and themes described above because *Romeo and Juliet* has been adapted and alluded to within popular media for quite some time. This historical reuse of Shakespeare's tragedy offers an initial introduction as to why it continues to be a worthwhile source of adaptation for popular music artists in particular; however, why has *Romeo and Juliet* continued to be a leading source of adaptation for so long, especially in popular music? Other than an audience's recognition of the household name, "Romeo and Juliet," how is the text expressing the culture and ideals of the 16th century expected to resonate with modern listeners? In short, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* continues to be such a common, recycled source for popular music because it has been established as a symbol/canon that the people of today reuse to convey particular themes and ideas, even when they apply these themes and ideas much differently than the original text. This goes to say that modern day music artists that choose *Romeo and Juliet* as a source text often do not intend to replicate the text and its implications but use it as a tool to express their own ideas. Thus, the original, *Romeo and Juliet*, and its cultural implications should not be expected to resonate with modern-day listeners. Instead, modern-day listeners should expect to connect with the new, adapted forms of the text that are presented by those in the popular music industry.

The modern-day popular music creators that will be discussed do not adapt William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* merely in the effort to appropriate the play's popularity or its

expression of 16th century culture. Instead, these music artists work to express the cultural themes and ideals present at the time of their music's release and are able to use *Romeo and Juliet* as a source text because it has been established as a symbolic canon separate from the play's original content and thematic implications. The vast majority of audiences are familiar with *Romeo and Juliet*, but not necessarily as a literary text. Modern audiences are instead familiar with the ideas and context of *Romeo and Juliet* consisting of the two namesake characters, star-crossed love, and immense tragedy because *Romeo and Juliet* has been established as a brand for these canonical ideas throughout popular culture, a brand often separate from the text itself. Recent music adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* most often reinvent these ideas from the original play and make them more suitable for the present day with the incorporation of themes surrounding ideas such as racial inequality, feminism, and LGBTQIA+ rights. Also, with further examination of *Romeo and Juliet* music adaptations from times such as *West Side Story* from 1961 and *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* from 2017, it is clear that music adaptations of the same tragedy can provide very different portrayals of culture. So, it is not to say that popular music artists adapting *Romeo and Juliet* do not appropriate the play's pre-existing popularity after all, but that these music adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* seek to express culturally accurate depictions of themes that widespread audiences are familiar with, themes often connected to the original *Romeo and Juliet*. These cultural differences are dependent on the time of the adaptation's release and prove that the process of adaptation allows adaptors to use *Romeo and Juliet* to express unique, culturally informed themes in their music that differ greatly from other adaptations as well as Shakespeare's original text.



## Chapter 1: The Definition of Adaptation as Applied to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

Shakespeare, and *Romeo and Juliet* by extension, has been established as a canon not just within the scope of literary studies, but within society more widely. With such an influence and presence in culture, many popular music releases have taken on many of the canonical qualities of *Romeo and Juliet* as their own and established them as a signature part of the popular music industry. Despite many artists' motivation to change what the source text is expressing, *Romeo and Juliet* remains a worthy inspiration for popular music because it allows the artists to present an original take on a familiar text to a well-informed audience. *Romeo and Juliet* has been established as a thematic staple of tragic romance, deceit, and conflict, topics often present in popular music publications. However, there is a difference between adapting *Romeo and Juliet* and alluding to the play's general sense of romance and/or tragedy. It is important to first define a broader definition of adaptation itself as well as the role of an adapter before attempting to explain why *Romeo and Juliet* continues to be used throughout popular culture and, more specifically, popular music.

At first, defining a particular piece of popular culture or media as adaptation seems to be simple, but the course of adaptation studies argues otherwise. Adaptation studies play an integral role in the relationship between Shakespeare's original tragedy and the production of *Romeo and Juliet* inspired music/music adaptations today. While the definition of an "adaptation" is debated over, adaptation scholar Linda Hutcheon provides a worthy attempt at a definition. In her book, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon attempts to define this term many times, but one of the most applicable and simple definitions she provides is as follows: "Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (3). Essentially, Hutcheon is stating that adapters are repeating aspects of their chosen source text in their adaptations but are not copying the text exactly. While

this definition is certainly not concrete, many of the popular music pieces like the musical film *West Side Story* and Halsey's *A Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* qualify as music adaptations within the parameters of the definition Hutcheon has established. These pieces of music are most often interpreting the source text, *Romeo and Juliet*, and most often supplying a new meaning, theme, plot point, etc. of their own. This process is "repetition without replication," i.e., the process of adaptation (Hutcheon 3).

It is important to note that Hutcheon is defining the process of adaptation and not the process of allusion. The distinction between adaptation and allusion is of the utmost importance to this essay's composition as well as Hutcheon's ongoing framework of adaptation studies. In addition to the definition of "repetition without replication," *A Theory of Adaptation* states that three following parameters should apply to a piece in order to define it as an adaptation:

- An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works
- A creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging
- An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work (Hutcheon 4)

If following these defining guidelines of adaptation, then one is positioned to theorize adaptation most effectively. Hutcheon states that a vaster definition "would clearly make adaptation rather difficult to theorize" because it permits practices such as allusion into the definition, which do not offer any additional commentary or engagement of source texts that would prompt extended scholarly inquisition (5). Without defining characteristics such as the ones listed above, adaptation's definition is broadened and starts to include pieces that do not extensively engage with source texts but rather imitate or replicate in Hutcheon's words, pre-existing parts of the source piece it references. So, instead of pursuing a vast definition, adaptations should follow the parameters Hutcheon identifies. The popular music adaptations that interest this essay's scope of

theorization must then be recognizable “transpositions” of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* into a modern popular music publication. These music adaptations must also interpret the original *Romeo and Juliet* while “appropriating” and “salvaging” the original work, meaning the adaptations incorporate original elements from the tragedy, but also rework parts of the play in order to make their piece more suitable for the present day. Then, lastly, the popular music adaptations must be extensive engagements with Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and the play’s themes, characters, plots, etc. as opposed to brief allusions to the text in an effort to identify the presence of tragic love or another of the text’s canonical themes or ideas.

Modern music pieces such as the well-known “Love Story” by Taylor Swift will not be identified strictly as adaptations following this same definition, but more-so allusions. This song references the characters and plot points in Shakespeare’s original text in an effort to express exactly what the song’s title suggests: a stereotypical love story. While Swift’s “Love Story” may prove that Shakespeare’s relevance to popular culture extends to that of the modern-day, the song repeats many of the familiar ideas from *Romeo and Juliet* without making any sort of commentary on the culture or themes present in the play and/or society today. Hutcheon states that her definition, “permits [her] to draw distinctions; for instance, allusions to and brief echoes of other works would not qualify as extended engagements” (4). It is important to distinguish adaptation from allusion then because of allusion’s habit of replicating parts of source text without truly engaging with its source extensively. Allusions is not a wealthy place of scholarly discussion because they do not add to the original state or ideas of the text they are referencing, such as with “Love Story.” While this song can very well be classified as an adaptation despite its lack of engagement with the play, for the sake of this essay in particular and according to Hutcheon’s definition, it is most fruitful to focus on pieces that adapt *Romeo and Juliet* in the

effort to express a new form of a theme or culture not present in the original play. So, the pieces that demonstrate this process of repetition of Shakespeare's play with the addition of new ideas will be focused on as "adaptations." Hutcheon's definition of adaptation then leads into the explanation of why Shakespeare and his play, *Romeo and Juliet*, continue to be used throughout popular music. The motives behind the persistent "repetition without replication" of *Romeo and Juliet* in the popular music industry can be examined using three areas of focus: the presence of Shakespeare as a canon in society, the intentions of the adapter, and the identity of music as an adaptive medium.

**Chapter 2: Why Shakespeare?: Evidence for the Persistent Popularity of *Romeo and Juliet***

When it comes to the overall presence of Shakespeare in popular culture, it is clear that Shakespeare and his play *Romeo and Juliet* has been established as a canon or perhaps a “brand” in our society as Kate McLuskie and Kate Rumbold have argued in their chapter “Branding Shakespeare.” These authors approach Shakespeare from an economic perspective, interrogating its value in consumer markets—whether this is monetary value or social value. The authors identify that Shakespeare is not a brand in a literal sense because there is no singular producer or company receiving the annual turnover of the “Shakespeare brand” (McLuskie 212). However, metaphorically, Shakespeare acts as a brand because of its reuse for the production of new products, adaptations in this instance, and it implies a certain level of quality and class that are often associated with brand names over time (McLuskie 212).

Like the famous apparel brand *Nike*, people are widely familiar with the brand of Shakespeare because of its popularity in a certain market. While *Nike* is popular in the athletic apparel market, Shakespeare metaphorically acts as a brand in the market that is popular culture and popular music more narrowly. People also approach the use of the “Shakespeare brand” with certain assumptions and ideas in mind hence why the use of Shakespeare implies a certain level of quality, class, and most definitely familiarity with widespread audiences. In the same way that a person might approach a *Nike* sneaker with the assumption that the shoes will be good to run in, an audience member will approach an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* with the assumption that they will understand its content and that it is of high quality. This is because Shakespeare was established as a brand marker for quality and familiarity within literature early on in history. Then, this ultimately led to Shakespeare and his individual work, *Romeo and Juliet*, being defined as brand markers and household names within popular culture’s forms of entertainment.

While McLuskie and Rumbold orient Shakespeare more widely as a brand, the play *Romeo and Juliet* acts as a brand on its own merit, which helps to explain why the play continues to be an appealing source for popular music adaptations. The *Romeo and Juliet* brand of Shakespeare is a very appealing source of adaptation because it allows modern music creators to “borrow value from Shakespeare and trade profitably on his name” (McLuskie 213). The fact that audiences will recognize the mention or adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* in popular music pieces automatically increases the value and appeal of adapting the play for popular music artists. Also, just like people’s approach to the “Shakespeare brand,” people will approach a specific adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* with assumptions specifically surrounding theme and plot. Popular music audiences will approach a modern-day, *Romeo and Juliet* music adaptation with the assumption that the piece will be about tragic, youthful love in some capacity, which is already one of the most sought-after topics in popular music. R.S. White, a professor of English at the University of Western Australia, emphasizes the idea that Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* has been established as a canonical short-cut for expressing a sense of romance in music today. White states that “if some person were unaware of its existence as a play by Shakespeare, she or he could be forgiven for thinking that *Romeo and Juliet* is in essence a musical” since “the most insistent subject of popular music composed for the mass consumption of adolescents in modern times has been melancholy love” (183). Oftentimes, this sort of *melancholy love* that White mentions is demonstrated with the allusion to or adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* within popular music. Some adolescents might assume that Shakespeare’s play is originally of a musical nature, especially if they have not been exposed to the source text before. *Romeo and Juliet* has been reused in popular music so much that it now acts as a staple within the production of music about tragic love stories.

Besides *Romeo and Juliet* offering music artists an easy way to express topics of tragedy and love in their music, the play also gives artists the opportunity to recontextualize the play's original, well-known themes into new forms and new expressions of modern culture. In McLuskie and Rumbold's words, adapting Shakespeare allows artists to "co-produce" new kinds of meaning and value for Shakespeare in the market" (213). Although, Hutcheon makes the point that adaptors embrace the process of "(re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation" and, ultimately, "appropriation and salvaging" (Hutcheon 4). With the combination of these authors' similar ideas, it is clear that adaptors of *Romeo and Juliet* and users of the *Romeo and Juliet* "brand" are, in fact, one and the same. Adaptors often use the brand of *Romeo and Juliet* to access the play's pre-existing popularity and familiarity with audiences in order to "co-produce" new values for the play and/or appropriate or salvage the text's ideas. Essentially, what this all means is that while modern music artists feed off *Romeo and Juliet*'s popularity for their own benefit, they often do this so they can add their own meaning and values into the play's original context. While some audiences may interpret this a negative form of "appropriation" as the word's connotation may suggest, the large portion of modern-day music adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* work to salvage the original play by redefining many of the play's outdated themes and characteristics. Music artists do this by inserting new cultural ideals like feminism and racial inequality into the context of the original *Romeo and Juliet*, which makes it more appealing to current, liberated audiences. *Romeo and Juliet* also becomes more of an expressive, malleable source of adaptation for popular music artists as a result. Therefore, when modern music artists adapt *Romeo and Juliet*, they prolong the play's popularity and fuel their work's own popularity, giving them the opportunity to make a statement of their own through their use of Shakespeare's work. Beyond this though, why are popular music adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* of particular

interest to the field of scholarly research? Also, why are popular music adaptations of special importance as compared to different modes of adaptation such as film, literature, etc.?

Many modern creators adapt *Romeo and Juliet* in order to refashion Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* for the specific audience that exists at the time of the production's release. While music adaptations follow this same process, the adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* into the popular music medium sets itself apart from other modes of adaptation. To start, popular music is able to access various communities and widespread audiences in comparison to other modes of adaptation. Dr. Adam Hansen, a Senior Lecturer in English at Northumbria University, poses an important question concerning popular music's accessibility: "Is modern popular music made by or made for 'the people', generated from mass populations or sold to them?" (Hansen 26). In the end, the answer to Hansen's question is both. Popular music is made by the people that make up popular music audiences as well as for the people in these audiences, making it one of the most culturally relevant modes of entertainment today. Popular music as a medium accomplishes this quite easily because modern-day music artists act on their views as a member of society/popular culture, and this manifests the topics of their music. Then, ultimately, music artists are motivated to produce music adaptations that their anticipated audience populations can relate to and enjoy, thus making music even more culturally appropriate and aware. Daniel Fischlin, in his chapter "Sounding Shakespeare: Intermedial Adaptation and Popular Music," informs readers of the widespread popularity of music adaptations in today's culture. Fischlin suggests that multiple communities engage with popular music as well as Shakespeare "across multiple forms of culture, media, and meaning" which assures "that the intermedial effects, which one must also recognize as adaptive effects, are consistently associated with the attempt to generate new meaning through novel cultural practices" (Fischlin 262). Fischlin's point then leads back to the



idea that modern music artists pursue *Romeo and Juliet* as a source of adaptation because it allows them to not only access a widespread audience, thereby many different cultural communities, but allows them to express modern presentations of culture throughout their music releases. This makes popular music one of the most complex modes of adaptation. Popular music is not only produced for and by the people and expresses the modern culture of the people, but its intersectionality of aural and visual modes make it perhaps the most multi-faceted form of expression for popular media.

The *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations referenced in this essay are either a piece of popular music, a musical, and/or a music video, all of which differ greatly from other possible mediums such as books, films, etc. A leading advantage of these music adaptations is that ““music offers aural ‘equivalents’ for characters’ emotions and, in turn, provokes affective responses in the audience; sound, in general, can enhance, reinforce, or even contradict the visual and verbal aspects” (Hutcheon 19). Therefore, the possibilities for adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* and their expressions in the music medium is broadened by music’s ability to express thematic qualities through words/lyrics as well as the sounds produced in the songs. Music artists can better express the characters, plot, and emotions discovered in the original play as a result and are able to express their commentary and cultural additions to the source text more effectively. With the help of the musical film *West Side Story* and the music album *A Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* by Halsey, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is revealed to hold a strong presence in popular music today. The adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* in popular music permits creators to express their own statements on modern politics and culture by the means of the original tragedy’s presence as a canon.

### Chapter 3: *West Side Story's* Cultural Critique through Adaptation

In 1961, Ernest Lehman's screenplay for *West Side Story* was brought to life as a musical drama film. With music from composer Leonard Bernstein and lyricist Stephen Sondheim as well as featured performances from now-famous actors Natalie Wood, Rita Moreno, Richard Beymer, and others, *West Side Story* is now regarded as a staple of popular theater as well as a one of the most well-known, modern adaptations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The 1961 musical film, *West Side Story*, was based on the original Broadway musical of the same name, which in turn was adapted from Shakespeare's classic tragedy. However, even though *West Side Story* is now frequently acknowledged as a "classic" of sorts, the musical made adaptive changes to the archetypal *Romeo and Juliet* in an effort to express some radical, liberal statements about society and culture during the time of the musical's release. The intention of *West Side Story* is not just to adapt *Romeo and Juliet*, but to express the senses of racial inequality, violence, and gang culture in 1950s New York City. The musical film's use of Shakespeare's text to express these themes is not just coincidental, but rather a strategic choice to adapt a text that widespread audiences are already familiar with and alter it. Music in particular plays an imperative role in *West Side Story*, permitting the musical film to express a strong cultural message through film but also through the popular music industry all the while positioning itself around the familiar context of *Romeo and Juliet*. With these alterations, the creators of *West Side Story* expose the racial disparities of 1950s New York by inserting modern elements of racial divides and violence into Shakespeare's pre-existing themes of feuding groups and doomed love through song.

Before delving into the specifics of *West Side Story's* plot and its adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, it is imperative to identify the cultural tensions that inspired *West Side Story* to express a detailed account of intense, racial divides. In 1917, 44 years before the creation of *West*

*Side Story*, the United States claimed Puerto Rico as a U.S. territory (“Today in History-October 8”). As a result, “[s]tarting in the 1920s, Puerto Ricans began leaving the island to seek employment in cities like New York,” where they were often segregated into their own impoverished communities deprived of the same rights as white citizens (“Today in History-October 8”). Puerto Rican immigrants were often promised the “American Dream,” but, in reality, the American Dream promised to Puerto Ricans became the continual search for work with poor pay, not the opportunity to make “new histories from newfound cultures” (Bernard-Carreño 62). Instead, Puerto Ricans, like many other minority populations facing the American majority, were cast out with urban populations, specifically New York, and forced to work and live in poor conditions. Immigration from Puerto Rico to the United States continued into the 1950s; Puerto Rican immigrants then continued to experience these impoverished conditions whilst *West Side Story*’s screenplay was first being produced. The musical form of *West Side Story* (1961) and the screenplay it was based off are directly reflective of these tensions between Puerto Rican immigrants and white American citizens in 1950s New York City, but also critical of the racial injustices taking place in this portion of history. *West Side Story* portrays this criticism of the systematic racism against Puerto Rican immigrants by displaying two rival groups, the Jets and the Sharks—whites versus Puerto Ricans.

The musical starts out depicting these two opposing street gangs in 1950s New York City. The Jets are a primarily white European group of young men that are “native” to New York. The Sharks are a group of Puerto Rican individuals whose families immigrated to the city following the United States’ claim over Puerto Rico as a U.S. territory in 1917. The leader of the Jets, Riff, and the leader of the Sharks, Bernado, are rivals, foils for one another within their opposing gangs. However, the main characters of *West Side Story* remain Tony, Riff’s best

friend, and Maria, Bernado's younger sister. While it is clear to Riff and Bernado's loved ones that the gangs despise each other, Tony and Maria fall helplessly in love while at a public dance hall. Despite being torn apart by their opposing loved ones, Tony rushes to Maria's home after he leaves the dance, singing the now musical theater classic "Maria" on his way. After this adapted "balcony scene," Tony and Maria continue to meet one another in secret, knowing that the Jets and the Sharks would not approve of their relationship. Inevitably though, the two warring street gangs discover Tony and Maria's relationship after all and schedule a rumble—a street fight—between their two gangs to come to some sort of resolution. Instead, a series of tragic events transpire. Bernado, the leader of the Sharks and Maria's brother, brings a knife to the fight and kills Riff, the leader of the Jets and Tony's closest friend. Tony then retaliates and kills Maria's brother in a fit of rage. Simultaneously though, Chino, a close friend of the late Bernado and wishful suitor of Maria, seeks out Tony with a gun, wishing to avenge the murder of his friend and the alleged dishonor of Maria. Close friends like Doc, a shopkeeper adapted from Friar Laurence, and Anita, a friend of Maria's adapted from *Romeo and Juliet's* original Nurse, attempt to aid the couple in preserving their relationship, but ultimately fail. Chino shoots and kills Tony as he tries to reach Maria across a courtyard, and Maria is left to grieve over her lover's dead body. The two gangs gather at the scene, coming together to move Tony's body and go with the police. Maria is left alive but shrouded in a mourning veil.

Initially, it is easy to compare much of the plot and overarching themes of *West Side Story* to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The musical adaptation, *West Side Story*, not only foils many of the key characters from Shakespeare's original *Romeo and Juliet*, but it also adapts many of the signature, canonical scenes from the play as well as the overarching theme of two doomed lovers: the white European, Tony, and the Puerto Rican immigrant, Maria. These

aforementioned racial identities are of the utmost importance when it comes to defining the differences between the adapted *West Side Story* and the classic tragedy. These differences are of just as much of interest—if not more—than the similarities between the two pieces. With the examination of the shared characteristics of the musical, *West Side Story*, and its source text, it appears that *Romeo and Juliet* acts as a limitless source for many modern music adaptations. Then, with the identification of the differences between these pieces, it is clear that *Romeo and Juliet*'s contents are adapted within *West Side Story* in order to apply the canonical plot and themes of the original play to a modernized sense of culture that most definitely did not exist during Shakespeare's time.

Beginning with possibly the most iconic scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, there is *West Side Story*'s adaptation of the so-called balcony scene that features Tony and Maria singing the song "Tonight" on a fire escape. This scene between Tony and Maria and the original secret meeting between Romeo and Juliet in the garden of the Capulet estate are quite comparable on the surface. Tony stands in the alleyway below Maria's New York apartment fire escape calling to her in the same way that Romeo calls to Juliet in Shakespeare's writing. Romeo says to Juliet, "Let me stand here till thou remember it," to which Juliet replies "I shall forget, to have thee stand there" (2.2.185-186). Romeo then says, "Rememb'ring how I love thy company. / And I'll stay, to have thee still forget, / Forgetting any other home but this" (2.2.185-189). In this portion of *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare describes when Juliet asks Romeo to return to her balcony after retreating inside her home to answer a call from her nurse. At the sight of Romeo, Juliet forgets why she asked him to return and uses her forgetfulness as an excuse to prolong her time with her lover. This leads to Romeo's proclamation that they should forget any sort of "home" other than the sense of the home they find when they are together.

Similarly, *West Side Story*'s song "Tonight" conveys Tony and Maria as changed human beings, lost within this new love and ultimately this new form of reality they have discovered being together. The song's lyrics read as follows: "Going mad, shooting sparks into space / Today, the world was just an address / A place for me to live in / No better than alright / But here you are / And what was once a world is a star / Tonight" (Bernstein, et. al. 3:31). In the same way that Romeo defines his time with Juliet as his new home, Tony and Maria indicate through song that their world started as just an "address" before falling in love, but now, their world is a star—a cosmic, passionate reason to live their lives going forward. Through these central similarities, it is clear that *West Side Story* preserved a classic scene as well as theme from the original *Romeo and Juliet*. According to their musical duet "Tonight," Tony and Maria's love is an all-encompassing whirlwind of emotion that turns their worlds upside down in the same way that Shakespeare's characters' lives were drastically changed by the start of their star-crossed relationship. The fact that such a fundamental, introductory scene in *West Side Story* is so closely adapted from Shakespeare's text demonstrates the ongoing relevance of an overarching theme that was first branded in *Romeo and Juliet*: love cannot be contained by social boundaries. However, why then, if *Romeo and Juliet* is so relevant to the modern-day, were the creators of *West Side Story* led to change many of the characteristics of the original play?

In *The English Journal*, educator Paula Ressler states that "*West Side Story* is about young love across ethnic and turf barriers" (53); herein lies a principal similarity as well as a principal difference between *West Side Story* and its source text. As previously expressed, *West Side Story* is very similar to *Romeo and Juliet* in terms of various plot points, such as the balcony scene, as well as some of themes the musical contains, such as the theme of love and its consequences. Although, the musical film intentionally expresses the divide of a young love

across “ethnic and turf barriers” as Ressler expresses, not a prideful feud between two wealthy families like Shakespeare’s play illustrated before (53). Elements of this specifically racial and cultural barrier are placed throughout the entirety of *West Side Story*, even in the scenes that are hyper-similar to the original tragedy. For example, Tony and Maria’s characters mirror the original balcony scene that transpires between Romeo and Juliet. Tony’s character proclaims his love for Maria in a New York City alleyway rather than from a lush garden in Verona, proceeding to climb up the framework of a fire escape as Romeo once climbed up the trellis of the balcony. While the similarities between these two respective scenes are clear, *West Side Story*’s change in setting points to a recontextualization of Shakespeare’s play that speaks to issues of race in the 1950s. The constant struggle for Puerto Rican immigrants to work and live in urban America throughout the 1950s clearly led *West Side Story* to express the racial disparities present in the society its audience members continued to experience in 1961. *West Side Story*, as a result, is a radical expression of the racial divides in 1950s America, revealing that the sort of feud Shakespeare first described is still relevant to the modern-day but under the pretenses of the racial divides between white citizens and Puerto Ricans.

This sense of modern culture applied to the many of the qualities of *Romeo and Juliet* is most easily studied in *West Side Story*’s song, “America,” sung by the Puerto Rican Sharks and their female companions. “America” chronicles some of the advantages Puerto Rican immigrants experience in the United States through song, but, more prevalently, the disadvantages they experience because of their racial and ethnic identities. *West Side Story*’s “America” helps to clearly illustrate the feud at play in the piece but does so more successfully than even *Romeo and Juliet* because it supplies the audience with a probable, culturally accurate reason for the feud taking place. In Shakespeare’s original tragedy, the only explanation given to the reader for the

historical warring between the Montagues and the Capulets is found within the prologue: “From ancient grudge break to new mutiny, / Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean” (Prologue 3-4). The hatred between the Montagues and Capulets is identified for the reader and the continuance of violence as a consequence of this hatred is as well. Still, William Shakespeare provides no explanation for the feud itself. In the song “America” though, the Sharks and their girls not only express the reasons behind their hatred for their enemies, the Jets, but also their overall resentment towards the United States as a country. The song gives various examples of how the Sharks experience prejudice in their day-to-day life as immigrants in America. For example, when Anita, the girlfriend of the Shark’s leader Bernado, sings “I’ll get a terrace apartment.” Her boyfriend, Bernado, replies, “Better get rid of your *accent*” (Bernstein, et. al. 1:45). This then leads into the chorus of the song which provides a clear expression of the song’s main message, but also one of the central themes of the entire film. The Sharks sing, “Life can be bright in America. / If you can fight in America. / Life is all right in America. / If you’re all-white in America” (Bernstein, et. al. 1:51). Overall, the song “America” illustrates the disproportionate rights of the Sharks in comparison to the entirety of the white majority in 1950s New York, but especially that of their white counterparts, the Jets. Since the Sharks are not “all-white,” they are considered to be lesser and deprived of the basic rights and freedoms America promised to Puerto Rican immigrants during this time. Ultimately then, *West Side Story* gives its audience an explanation for why the Sharks continue to feud with the Jets and America as a whole. Their feud is a result of a group of Puerto Rican immigrants attempting to maintain their freedoms and rights while white groups like the Jets continue to hold prejudice against them due to the systematic racism present in the 1950s.



The song “America” also gives the characters of *West Side Story* more license to express their experiences and emotions outside of typical film and written mediums. The use of the music medium as a whole gives *West Side Story* the upper hand when it comes to the expression of its characters as well as the opportunity for audiences to relate and bond with the story being presented to them. As Hutcheon has noted, “music has been called ‘the embodiment of excess’: when speaking characters break into song, they imply that ‘life cannot be contained in its ordinariness’ (Hutcheon 37). With *West Side Story* and the song “America” specifically, the Sharks suggest to the listening audience that their experiences in America require a more powerful medium of expression than speaking or *telling* in the case of reading a play. This musical mode of expression is especially important to *West Side Story* because the musical’s songs highlight the important themes and experiences present in the piece. The Sharks break out into “America” in order to emphasize the disparities they experience and the reasons they have for warring with their white counterparts. Therefore, this song not only provides the audience with a reason for the feud between the Sharks and the Jets but is able to emphasize this reason so clearly with its use of the music medium. The role of music in *West Side Story* is then what permits the musical film to contain such a strong cultural message positioned around the familiar context of *Romeo and Juliet*. In a chapter of *The Edinburgh Companion to Shakespeare and the Arts*, it is stated that musical adaptations often strive to “revoice their originals in the music and language of a more contemporary idiom” (Teague 186). With *West Side Story*’s use of song, it is easy for listening audiences to identify the importance of the systematic racism at play in *West Side Story* because the song emphasizes it, but also because systematic racism was an active social norm during the contemporary age of this musical. With songs like “America,” it becomes clear that the prejudice against Puerto Rican immigrants is what instigated the resentment

between the opposing groups, but also what led to the tragic end of the musical film. While Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* of course ended in tragedy, *West Side Story*'s tragic conclusion is tied to more than a feud between two groups. The tragic ending of *West Side Story* is a consequence of the racist cultural ideals historically present during the adaptation's creation, establishing the ending as that much more personal to its audience and their presence in modern society.

The musical film, *West Side Story*, draws to a close with its last song "Finale," mirroring that of *Romeo and Juliet*'s conclusive dual-suicide scene. While the scenes differ in many respects, both *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story* share a similar message in the end. Romeo and Juliet's deaths were a result of their feuding families and the hatred that flowed between them. Tony's death at the end of *West Side Story* is also a result of the feud he was forced into as well; however, there are two key characteristics missing from *West Side Story*'s mirroring of the original concluding scene of *Romeo and Juliet* that cannot go unnoticed. First off, Tony is murdered by Chino, a hopeful suitor of Maria comparable to Count Paris. Tony does not die by suicide like the original Romeo. Secondly, Tony's lover, Maria, does not die in the conclusion of the musical. Instead, the last moments of the musical use "Finale," its shortest song lyrically, to express the goodbyes that take place between Tony and Maria. As Tony falls to the ground after being shot by Chino, he states, "They won't let us be" to which Maria replies, "Then we'll get away" as she cradles Tony in her arms (Bernstein, et. al. 0:16). "Finale" then continues into its short, lyrical portion in which Maria sings to Tony as he dies, "Hold my hand and we're halfway there. / Hold my hand and I'll take you there. / Somehow, someday, some..." (Bernstein, et. al. 0:30). "Finale" also features miscellaneous sounds that help to set the last, tragic scene of *West Side Story* such as the loud gunshot that kills Tony as well as Maria sobbing following his death

at the end of her melody. Overall, “Finale” paints an image of tragedy in the same way that the end of Romeo and Juliet’s lives do. However, the differences must not be ignored because the conclusion of *West Side Story* is what fully signifies the changes it has made to the original *Romeo and Juliet* and the effort the creators made to supply audiences with a clear message about the culture that existed at the time of the musical film’s production.

To start, Tony being murdered at the end of *West Side Story* rather than dying by suicide is a thematic choice that contains several implications not present in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. For one, Tony’s murder essentially eliminates the possibility for audience members of this adaptation to fault Tony and Maria for their relationship’s demise. In contrast, many audiences fault Romeo and Juliet for their story’s tragic ending while experiencing the original text. The lack of fault placed on *West Side Story*’s main characters only accentuates the blame that should be placed on the feud between the Sharks and the Jets as well as the systematic racism against immigrants more broadly. As Maria sang in the final song “Finale,” her and Tony desired to get away from the feud but most likely the restrictions of society as whole: Maria sings, “Hold my hand and I’ll take you there. / Somehow, someday” to comfort Tony, but also to express the idea that they could escape the hatred they continued to experience between their groups but in society as a whole (Bernstein, et. al. 0:37). Tony and Maria would escape it all “someday” but not in the present. *West Side Story* did not leave this aspect of the musical’s ending up for the audience's debate, but instead made it clear that Tony died as a direct consequence of the hateful, unforgiving relationship between these racially divided groups. This then reveals the deadly consequences of the racism present in the form of 1950s America that the audience members during this time were experiencing in their real lives. *West Side Story* is consequently more meaningful and applicable to audiences because it has modernized *Romeo and Juliet* in a way

that expresses familiar cultural experience. Gary Taylor, a teacher, used the cultural relevance of *West Side Story* to his advantage in his high school classroom. Even though Taylor's students did not learn well from *Romeo and Juliet*, they learned effectively from *West Side Story*: "No longer was it considered amusing that two Verona families were in a feud. The antagonism existing between groups became a reality. The social problems of Verona were juxtaposed with those of the teeming slum areas of New York City. And, of course, in the midst of this there was the meaningfulness of youthful love" (Taylor 484-485). Audiences made up of people like Taylor's students are knowing audiences of *Romeo and Juliet*, meaning they are already most likely familiar with Shakespeare's original text (Hutcheon 115). However, this does not mean the play is thematically effective on modern audiences or of popular modern interest. Adaptations like *West Side Story* have the ability to make a source text such as *Romeo and Juliet* effective for these audiences though by reorienting the characteristics of a canonical text into a more modern context.

As stated before, Maria, despite Tony's death, did not fall to her demise like an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* might suggest. Maria's survival, like Tony's murder, plays a pivotal role in the musical's meaning. Unlike Maria, the original Juliet dies by suicide after seeing her lover, Romeo, dead beside her as a result of drinking poison. Juliet first attempts to suck the poison from Romeo's lips, but then she resorts to the use of a dagger: "O, happy dagger, / This is thy sheath. There rust, and let me die" (5.3.174-175). Juliet then drives the dagger into her stomach, sealing the tragic fate of the two lovers. The Montagues and the Capulets are then left without a son and a daughter, putting an end to their feud. In *West Side Story*, the Jets and the Sharks are similarly shown coming together to help remove Tony's body from the scene of his death. Maria, though, remains alive at the end of *West Side Story*. Despite the musical's

undoubtable sadness, Maria's ending is in many ways an optimistic display on the creators' parts. Maria's perseverance not only defies the expectations of a *Romeo and Juliet* adaptation, but the odds at play in the society the musical takes place in. Tony, the white American man passes away, while Maria, the young, female Puerto Rican immigrant, perseveres and lives to see another day in the country that systematically hates her race. While Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* may have resolved the conflict between the Montagues and Capulets, what the creators are attempting to do with *West Side Story* is of a much higher caliber in terms of the modern-day. The ending of *West Side Story* containing Maria's survival and Tony's murder suggests that there could be a better future for Puerto Rican immigrants like Maria if the systematic racism in 1950s America were dissolved. Audience members are meant to be left with more than the resolution of a historical feud that Shakespeare first provides in *Romeo and Juliet*. Modern audience members are meant to leave *West Side Story* with a sense of reflection as members of society that condemned this realistic, bi-racial couple. This goes to show how malleable *Romeo and Juliet* is as a source text, allowing its adaptations to reform the play's original themes, characters, and plot into contexts more meaningful for contemporary audiences. Although, in comparison to later adaptations, *West Side Story* is just the beginning when it comes to displaying *Romeo and Juliet's* persistent popularity and applicability to the present day.

#### **Chapter 4: *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom's* Feminist Form of *Romeo and Juliet***

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* has continued to be a source for adaptation within the popular music industry well past the initial production of *West Side Story* in 1961. In fact, adaptations of Shakespeare's play are found quite frequently in 21st century popular culture, especially within popular music. A prime example of this is American singer-songwriter, Halsey, and her album *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*. Over 50 years following the release of the innovative musical *West Side Story*, Halsey created this studio album, taking direct inspiration from the original *Romeo and Juliet* as well as previous popular culture adaptations of Shakespeare's original text. Most notably, *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* drew inspiration from the film adaptation *Romeo + Juliet* from 1996 featuring famous actor Leonardo DiCaprio and the signature style and aesthetic first presented in this film by director, Baz Luhrmann. However, while Halsey, her collaborators, and her large fanbase never recognized *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* officially as an "adaptation," it is imperative to identify her album as such now.

Even though the album's engagement with *Romeo and Juliet* can be obscure, *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* can be identified as an adaptation under the terms of Linda Hutcheon's definition. Adaptation is a process of "(re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation" (Hutcheon 4). Halsey executes this process of adaptation quite eloquently by not only re-interpreting Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* but also re-interpreting a previous adaptation of the original play, the film *Romeo + Juliet* from 1996. Thus, *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* acts as an adaptation of a pre-existing film adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. By recontextualizing *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) though, Halsey also recontextualizes the original play, revealing many of the ways in which culture has progressed from the 16th century, the 1990s, and then into the 2000s. In Halsey's album, *Romeo and Juliet* is reshaped into a modern

portrayal of a romantic relationship that contains culturally accurate depictions of feminism and female sexuality present in 2017. While it may be surprising that a 16th century play was chosen as a source text for an album portraying such progressive, modern themes, Halsey's *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* accesses *Romeo and Juliet*'s pre-existing popularity and familiarity with audiences by adapting the original play and is still able to supply its own unique, modern message. *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* implements the well-known characteristics of *Romeo and Juliet* then reinvents them for modern audiences in order to express the gender politics of the 21st century by asserting a sense of contemporary, feminist ideals onto a traditionally heteronormative play.

Altogether, Halsey's *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* is a music album describing the tribulations of a doomed love story inspired by Halsey's own experience with a toxic romantic relationship. Along with inspiration from personal experience, *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* also adapts *Romeo and Juliet* most clearly with the characters Luna Aureum, the album's Juliet, and Solis Angelus, the album's Romeo, while taking place in the city of Anorev, a clever spelling of Verona backwards. The music artist's primary inspiration for creating *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* actually stems from the 1996 film adaptation *Romeo + Juliet*. This film, much like the musical *West Side Story*, orients many of the original concepts of Shakespeare's play into a modern setting. *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) takes place in Verona Beach and the characters, Romeo and Juliet, are members of opposing family businesses that meet at a party and fall in love. The style and aesthetic of *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) is mirrored in Halsey's series of music videos for her album. The music videos take on hyper-colorful settings and style choices for their characters like the 1996 film adaptation. Luna, the album's main focus and adaptation of Juliet, has bright blue hair for the majority of the videos and dresses in modern garb such as crop-tops and tight-

fitting clothing. In these stylistic ways, Halsey drew much of the album's presentation from *Romeo + Juliet* (1996).

As stated before, another part of the inspiration for *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* was a relationship-gone-wrong that Halsey experienced. In an interview with Australian television personality, Ash London, Halsey explains her initial connection to Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) while experiencing heartbreak of her own: "We're going through this break up and watching *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and I'm watching and I'm like 'oh my god' this means so much more to me now" (Halsey). Why then did Halsey connect to Baz Luhrmann's film adaptation *Romeo + Juliet* as an audience and consequently a music creator? Perhaps Halsey discovered a kinship with this *Romeo and Juliet* adaptation because it places the canons of Shakespeare's writing into the contemporary age. *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) acts as "a translation of an elite work into one that is popular and colloquial" (Teague 186). As mentioned before, *Romeo and Juliet* has been adapted repeatedly throughout popular culture, especially within popular music. Halsey's primary inspiration did not, in fact, come from William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, but rather a hyper-modernized film adaptation of the classic tragedy taking place in the 90s with characters and settings that she could connect with as a result of the familiarity of the film. Halsey then displays as an audience member as well as a creator the principal idea that Shakespeare continues to be popularized because of its malleable nature as a source of adaptation and its consequent applicability to all ages. However, while Halsey's primary inspiration is sourced from an adaptation from the 1990s and not the late 16th century, *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* still offers worthy commentary on Shakespeare's original *Romeo and Juliet* and how the play has been adapted within the popular music industry.

As a result of *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*'s relationship with Baz Luhrmann's film,



Halsey and her album are not only connected to the 1996 film adaptation, but the original play itself as a result of its relationship with Baz Luhrmann's film. *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom's* adaptation of Shakespeare's original tragedy is best discovered in the album's beginning track: "The Prologue." As might be suggested with the song's title, Halsey's "The Prologue" sets the scene for the narrative she creates with her album by incorporating the prologue of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* into the song lyrically. "The Prologue" as well as the original *Romeo and Juliet* text are as follows: "Two households, both alike in dignity / In fair Verona, where we lay our scene / From ancient grudge break to new mutiny / Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean" (Prologue 1-4). Halsey then continues to recite the remainder of the original prologue from *Romeo and Juliet* in this beginning song, establishing an immediate connection between the classic play and *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* for all listening audiences. Listening to this first track, listeners will automatically be able to associate the album with *Romeo and Juliet*, not the 1996 adaptation that Halsey technically drew her inspiration from. This association is drawn to Shakespeare's text and not Luhrmann's film because it is most obviously the writings of the original play, but also because of the universality of the play itself. While many intermedial aspects of *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* such as music videos as well as social media engagement convey direct inspiration and adaptation of Luhrmann's 1996 film, the act of directly quoting Shakespeare himself aligns *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* with the earliest form of these doomed lovers for listening audiences. The prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the most recognizable pieces of literature present in popular culture. By using the original lines from the beginning of Shakespeare's play, Halsey is not only connecting the album to Shakespeare's text, but reinforcing its identity as an adaptation. While the entirety of *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* does not contain direct references like "The Prologue," this beginning song helps

listeners to identify Luna and Solis as adaptations of Romeo and Juliet going forward. For example, further on in other songs and music videos, such as Halsey's "Now or Never," a man and a woman struggle to come together while on opposite sides of opposing games, assumed to be Luna and Solis. In one instance as Halsey sings "I want you to love me now... / Now or never" a gun fight breaks out, and the House of Angelus, parallel to Romeo's family, kills a member of the House of Aureum, Luna/Juliet's family (Halsey 4:55). Without being oriented towards the album's source text by "The Prologue," a scene such as this may not be recognized by listening/viewing audiences as an adaptation of when Tybalt, Juliet's cousin, is killed in the original tragedy. "The Prologue" marks the remaining contents of the album as a commentary on the sort of doomed love first presented by Shakespeare, conveying the similarities between Romeo and Juliet's original story as well as the definite differences of a similar story set forth in modern-day music. Although, the differences between Shakespeare's play and Halsey's album are not just presented through the music lyrically, but also through modern, intermedial practices now implemented in the popular music industry.

Halsey's *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* is not simply a studio album or an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* but rather an intermedial engagement with Shakespeare and Luhrmann's pieces. *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*'s music not only conveys a direct adaptive relationship with *Romeo and Juliet* and its characters and themes; the album also implements different modern mediums such as music videos and social media engagement to strengthen its connection to Shakespeare's text and further establish and inter-personalize the narrative of Luna and Solis for its audience and fanbase. Characters, Luna Aureum and Solis Angelus, are never strictly named or mentioned throughout the album's lyrics. Instead, Halsey created a narrative world around her album before its release to the public. Scholar, Eduardo Viñuela, describes the steps Halsey took

to build the world around *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*: “Both characters and both houses had their Twitter accounts months before the album was released. Several letters with *Romeo and Juliet* verses were sent to certain fans... most of the references to *Romeo and Juliet* are in a series of music videos that interconnect the narrative of the songs” (217-218). Halsey used many present-day practices like social media engagement on Twitter and storytelling through music video publications to not only publicize her album, but to create a narrative and characters that otherwise would be very difficult to manifest in aural music alone. As mentioned previously, Luna and Solis are never strictly mentioned lyrically throughout the album. Instead, they are portrayed through respective social media accounts and visually through the narrative-storytelling of the music videos created. Linda Hutcheon quotes fellow adaptation scholar Robert Stamm and states that “the calibration of access to characters’ knowledge and consciousness” plays an imperative role in modern-day adaptations (Hutcheon 51). *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* gives its audience access to Luna and Solis’s thoughts and experiences by showing them through multimedia storytelling. While the songs never lyrically mention the events transpiring between Luna and Solis, the music videos supplement this absence and permit the songs to focus on overarching themes of doomed love and Halsey’s personal experience. Meanwhile, *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* maintains its identity as a *Romeo and Juliet* adaptation and gives Halsey more liberty to express commentary on *Romeo and Juliet* and insert depictions of modern cultural problems and identities.

*Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*’s depiction of 21st century cultural tensions is comparable to *West Side Story*’s depiction of the systematic racism present in 1950s America. Halsey’s album is specifically expressive of the feminist ideals motivated by the progression of feminist movements in present society as well as historical events taking place surrounding the time of

the album's release in 2017. Scholars have categorized the progression of feminism over the course of history into three waves: first wave feminism taking place up to and during the 1950s, second wave feminism taking place throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, and third wave feminism starting in the 1990s and continuing on in the present-day (Johnson 6). Current society finds itself in the midst of third wave feminism and, as a result, *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* is a deliberate representation of third wave feminism at work and many of the feminist values that come with the movement. The primary difference between society's current wave of feminism and the waves that came before it is third wave feminism's encouragement of intersectional identities. Julia Schuster, a scholar within the Institute of Women's and Gender Studies, explains that third wave feminism "focuses on diverse experiences of gendered oppression" and is "informed by black feminism" as well as "queer and intersectionality theory" ultimately supporting inclusive "understandings of women's interests and" recognitions of "fluid gender identities" (648). Current society's form of feminism extends the female identity out to members of all races and all sexualities. Halsey's *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* mirrors these feminist ideals by placing a female character, Luna, at the forefront of her *Romeo and Juliet* adaptation as well as by portraying Luna as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* was most notably released two years after the United States Supreme Court's historical *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision where they declared that "the right to marry is fundamental" to all couples of all sexualities, legalizing same-sex marriage throughout the entire country (Chappell). Halsey herself is often regarded as one of the leading queer music artists of the 21st century because of her own sexual identity as well as her extensive support of the LGBTQIA+ community (Jackman). Although, *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* in particular supports the modern ideals surrounding gay rights and the fluidity of sexuality with its depiction of Luna, the album's

main character, within a same-sex relationship. *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* defies the traditional conventions of gender and sexuality set forth in the original *Romeo and Juliet*.

Luna Aureum is the primary protagonist of *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*, portrayed by Halsey herself in the album's series of music videos, rather than her male counterpart, Solis. This approach to adapting *Romeo and Juliet* conflicts directly with the placement of the original Romeo and Juliet characters. Instead of following the conventions of the traditional *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* puts its female character in control of her own narrative in many ways, such as ending her destructive, star-crossed relationship with Solis as well as depicting the fluidity of her sexuality outside of heteronormative ideals. Like the feminism present in current society, Halsey's album emphasizes that women are allowed "to make their own decisions on what to do and how to live their lives," including decisions to participate in more than one romantic relationship (Johnson 9). *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* does not position Luna in the same way that *Romeo and Juliet* positions Juliet: only with interests in Romeo and their relationship. Instead, Luna is depicted as an empowered woman that not only has control over her romantic involvement with Solis, but also as a liberated character that is able to participate in other romantic relationships and queer ones at that.

In the album's song, "Strangers," Halsey sings the lyrics, "She doesn't kiss me on the mouth anymore. / Cause it's more intimate, than she thinks we should get. / She doesn't look me in the eyes anymore / Too scared of what she'll see, somebody holdin' me" (Halsey, et. al. 0:16). With the lyrics alone, it is clear that Halsey and by extension, Luna, are speaking about a female lover that is growing distant. Then, while referencing the music video for "Strangers," this struggle with a same-sex relationship is depicted more plainly. The music video features another love interest for Luna named Rosa Angelus, played by guest singer Lauren Jauregui, and shows

the two fighting in a boxing match. Rosa Angelus's character parallels that of Rosaline in the original *Romeo and Juliet*, a lover Romeo was pursuing until he met Juliet. "Strangers" helps to reveal the fluidity of Luna's sexuality; also, it is revealed that Luna is perhaps not a parallel for Juliet after all, but of Romeo, the man at the forefront of Shakespeare's tragedy. *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* is thus defying gender roles in the following ways.

The studio album defies previous depictions of Romeo and Juliet, these canonical star-crossed lovers, by placing the album's focus on Luna and putting her in control of her own narrative. Rather than focusing on Solis, the male character, the album fixates on Luna's experiences not just with Solis, but with previous romantic struggles. Instead of conforming to the heteronormative nature of *Romeo and Juliet*, Halsey inserts an accurate depiction of female sexuality found in the 21st century, one that does not follow the constraints of opposite sex attraction. The podcast *Unlimited Shakespeare*, discusses how the world around *Romeo and Juliet* has shifted and why creators might still choose to adapt his text:

Shakespeare's characters, "Romeo and Juliet," have not changed. The world around them, however, has...Attitudes about its language, ideas about its expressions of passion and sexuality, beliefs about whether what happens in the play is morally right or wrong. Those things have changed. Sometimes they've changed a lot, so much so that they have drastically altered the play, taking it far from anything Shakespeare ever wrote. ("Romeo and Juliet Through the Ages")

The intention behind *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* and any other Shakespeare adaptation for that matter is hardly ever to preserve the sense of culture expressed in the original source text. Instead, modern creators like Halsey work to express their perception of the culture present during the time of their adaptation's production through a work that is widely familiar to

audiences. In this respect, Halsey created a recognizable *Romeo and Juliet* retelling, but one that appealed to her modern fanbase and many of their current cultural values (Viñuela 214). The album *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* accomplishes this while allowing Halsey, like many other artists, to “rework traditional narratives including their position on current concerns like...LGBT rights and gender equality” (Viñuela 214). Modern audiences are more likely to resonate with a music album that depicts culturally relevant topics and concerns than an album that reinforces outdated cultural ideals. However, Halsey still chose to adapt *Romeo and Juliet*, a play that expresses various expired ways of thinking because it is a valued source of adaptation. *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*'s adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* permits Halsey to reinvent the outdated aspects of the play and preserve the universal, continually relevant themes and characters first created by Shakespeare. As presented by Halsey's album, tragic romantic experiences continue to be common today and are persistently a leading topic of popular music as a result. *Romeo and Juliet* is the most widely known form of tragic romance, of struggle between two groups. *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* used this pre-existing popularity to its advantage, formulated its own expression of a “doomed love story,” and became one of many *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations that continue to feed into the play's everlasting popularity.

## Conclusion

When a person hears the title, *Romeo and Juliet*, there is an array of assumptions one makes about a potential text or adaptation. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is far from a play alone in the contemporary age. Juliet and her lover, Romeo, are no longer characters, but symbols of tragedy, youth, and love. It is this symbolism that guides modern artists towards Shakespeare's original text as a source of adaptation in order to implement the themes that have been branded on the 16th century tragedy throughout the course of popular media's history. Therefore, Shakespeare and *Romeo and Juliet* by extension continue to be used throughout popular culture as source—for adaptation as well as general inspiration—because the play has been established as the leading canon for tragic love. For popular music artists, the sort of canonical identity that *Romeo and Juliet* holds offers a wealth of influence as a source of adaptation.

Present-day popular music creators utilize Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as a tool to express the cultural tensions and politics of the era in which the popular music is created. In the end, this is perhaps the most fruitful motivation for adapting Shakespeare and what most often guides modern popular music artists to reinvent the cultural contexts of *Romeo and Juliet* and reuse its thematic sense of doomed love. Popular music adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* are of particular interest because of the versatility of the music medium and mode of expression. While often paired with visual modes such as film in *West Side Story*'s instance and music videos for *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*, the focus of the adaptation remains the aural experience that is music and the lyrics the music provides to listening audiences. While popular music artists have continued to adapt Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* over the course of time, the music medium



as a whole has continued to adapt various mediums and combine them within one industry including but not limited to the use of music, video, literature, and even social media outlets.

Popular music artists also are able to offer a commentary on the original *Romeo and Juliet* as a result of adapting the play, showing their audiences the progression of society and culture more widely. As demonstrated primarily by the 1961 musical adaptation *West Side Story* and the 2017 studio album *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*, the expression of culture in a popular music *Romeo and Juliet* adaptation is entirely reliant on the societal norms and cultural debates present at the time of the music's release. Thereby, popular music adapters of *Romeo and Juliet* are able to present modern cultural issues like systematic racism and gender equality within their music and offer commentary on these issues found within current society. In this same way, *Romeo and Juliet* was able to reflect the cultural values present in the 16th century. Modern popular music adapters do not adapt *Romeo and Juliet* in an effort to preserve the original culture expressed in the original text. Instead, the modern creators opt to reinvent the play to make it more suitable for popular audiences while preserving the canonical expression of a tragic love story. As Linda Hutcheon explains, adaptation is "repetition without replication" (3). While popular music artists may continue to repeat *Romeo and Juliet* to no end, they are certainly not replicating this 16th century tale. Adaptations such as *West Side Story* and *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* instead manage to perpetuate *Romeo and Juliet's* familiarity with widespread audiences and its identity as a canon without replicating the ideals of a 16th century playwright. Modern music adaptations show their audiences a multitude of ways to adapt *Romeo and Juliet* and, consequently, the many ways in which society's cultural norms and tensions have varied over the course of time. In response, audiences should continue to listen closely to *Romeo and*

*Juliet* music adaptations and observe how the music reveals cultural issues that matter to these modern music artists and adaptors—cultural issues that should matter to everyone listening.

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## Appendix A: Thesis Proposal

### Research question

How have William Shakespeare's writings influenced/inspired music throughout history, and why have references to his work within music remained relevant to the modern-day? What does a Shakespeare reference, allusion, etc. accomplish in music?

### Initial Response

From my personal music-listening experience, William Shakespeare and the many works he has published have heavily impacted music as we know it today. References to Shakespeare can not only be discovered in opera and classical music adaptations, but also much more modern pieces of music such as "Ophelia" by The Lumineers or "Check Yes, Juliet" by We The Kings or even "The King Must Die" by Elton John. These are all songs I know and am familiar with because they are popular songs, and I encountered them in my own time listening to music. I often did not even recognize these songs as references to Shakespearean topics or, if I did, it seemed to me that it was just another cliché, archetypal topic to write a song about. Specifically, songs that reference *Romeo and Juliet* seem to have been established as almost canonical in the popular music world, simply because Romeo and Juliet's character have been established as the "faces of heartbreak."

I think a large part of why Shakespeare and his work has remained relevant all these years is because people have and always will be entertained by tragedy—especially tragic romance. People have adapted Shakespeare's many characters, stories, plots, etc. excessively and repeatedly. This repetitive process of referencing Shakespeare and adapting his works has shaped many of his writings into archetypal examples that songwriters include in their music to convey

feelings involved with tragedy, heartbreak, loneliness, destiny, etc. For example, if a songwriter were to refer to themselves as Romeo and a romantic partner as Juliet, listeners will quickly identify that the love this song is about is intense and perhaps doomed. This inference can be made by the listener solely based on the allusion to the play, *Romeo and Juliet*, and without any further explanation or unfolding of events within the song itself.

However, Shakespeare's works had to be chosen as this sort of "canon" or "archetype" at some point in time in order for it to act as such in music throughout history. I believe that William Shakespeare and his work, his plays especially, became canon because his work is what established the most popular forms of entertainment throughout history. While his plays were not necessarily musical, the creation and existence of Shakespeare's writing is what kick-started what we now consider the entertainment industry. He not only established archetypal characters and storylines, but also established a desire within the public to be entertained and performed for. Shakespeare's work is the basis for many songs and music pieces throughout history because many references to his work deliver clear images to listeners, but his work is also the basis for music because it helped to establish play performance, which lead to musicals, which lead to its inclusion in many songs we know and recognize today.

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### Draft Table of Contents

- Introduction
- Music in the Elizabethan Era and Its Role in Shakespeare's Works
- Shakespeare's Presence in Opera and Classical Music
- The Sonnets' Impact on Music
- Shakespearean Plays and their Musical Adaptations
- Shakespeare's Influence on Popular Music Today
- Conclusion

### Interdisciplinary Qualities of Thesis/Honors Project

My thesis will be delving into two primary subject areas: Shakespeare and music. The majority of my college career has been spent with a major in English; however, my passion for and interest in music has existed long before my time in college as well as my interest in literature. As a result of these two areas of my interest, I have chosen to research Shakespeare's literature and how it has impacted and/or influenced music, a different medium of expression, over the course of history. Within this thesis, I plan to discuss the history of Shakespeare in tandem with the history of music, including but not limited to the kinds of music present in the Elizabethan era, the history of opera and classical music and their connection to Shakespearean archetypes, as well as Shakespearean topics that are present in modern-day, popular music. Overall, I plan to delve into how Shakespeare's writing has affected music over time and what

effect Shakespearean influence and/or allusions have on different songs, especially the popular music that many readers will be familiar with such as “Love Story” by Taylor Swift or “Limelight” by RUSH. This is where my second adviser, Dr. Matthew Donahue, will act as a very valuable resource. Dr. Matthew Donahue is a teaching professor in the Department of Popular Culture with a special interest and expertise in popular music. Over the course of the semester, I plan on meeting with him periodically to review the parts of my thesis that specifically discuss Shakespeare’s effect and impact on pieces of popular music. Dr. Donahue will act as a source of feedback on the portions of my thesis that focus on popular music, but I also hope he will act as an overall mentor and helping hand. Dr. Donahue can help me remain true to my official thesis topic and course of action, and cover accurate, worthwhile information in the last piece of academic work I will submit to this university.

## Appendix B: Annotated Bibliography and Response Revisited

### Research Question

What kinds of themes and implications are established in music that references *Romeo and Juliet* for modern-day audiences? How do *Romeo and Juliet* music adaptations express popular culture and to what effect?

### Initial Response Revisited

My initial response and research question for my thesis project was originally guided by a broad approach towards William Shakespeare's influence and effect on popular music. Without any particular focus, I planned to research how different Shakespeare works influenced popular music and why music creators continued to adapt Shakespeare even today. Upon further research and reflection, my thesis topic has shifted its focus to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* specifically. My research revealed to me that *Romeo and Juliet* offers a wealth of information and commentary on the popular music genre as well as popular culture more widely. I also came to the realization that the vast majority of Shakespeare music adaptations that I was familiar with were direct references to *Romeo and Juliet* and/or its characters or themes as opposed to other Shakespeare works. My thesis is now led by questions such as the following: Why is *Romeo and Juliet* adapted in music so frequently? How does *Romeo and Juliet* music adaptations express popular culture and to what effect? With this current line of research, my thesis will now use *Romeo and Juliet* at its center with focuses on adaptation theory, cultural influence, and the play's overall presence as a canon/archetype in popular music.

In my initial response to Shakespeare's influence on popular music, I speculated that much of Shakespeare's work has remained relevant to the modern-day and the creation of

popular music because Shakespeare has been established as a canon. My initial response also implied that people continue to be entertained by themes like tragic romance into the present day, themes that were originally introduced to the field of entertainment by Shakespeare in the early 17th century. My research has not countered these speculations, but rather strengthened my thoughts on these topics. Firstly, my research has shown me how *Romeo and Juliet* specifically is canonical and that music artists continue to adapt it for a variety of reasons. Music artists make allusions to *Romeo and Juliet* and even base entire albums off of the play like Halsey's *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* because they are able to feed off the pre-existing popularity of the play and gain the attention of a more widespread audience. However, according to my research, this is not the only reason. It seems that music artists adapt *Romeo and Juliet* also because of the universal themes of youth, deceit, defiance, etc. found in it and use their music to modernize these concepts in a way that expresses current social, political, and/or cultural issues. The universalism of *Romeo and Juliet* is what permits the expression of modern-day issues, even though these expressions often defy the original themes and subjects found in the original play.

Different music artists and music mediums such as musical theater versus popular music heard on the radio use this universal capability of *Romeo and Juliet* to express various different messages in their respective music. For example, the cultural message and influence of 1961's *West Side Story*, a musical adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* focused on the gang culture in New York City, is much different than the cultural implications found in 2017's *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*, a music album by pop music artist Halsey that is a feminist, queer take on the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*. Even though Shakespeare's original play was most likely never intended to permit adaptors to express messages about racism, feminism, and the LGBTQ+ community, modern-day music artists use the play to accomplish these expressions anyway. The cultural

statements and messages also differ strongly from one music artist to another even though their music all qualifies as a *Romeo and Juliet* adaptation. With research, I have come to the conclusion that *Romeo and Juliet* is relevant to the modern-day music scene not necessarily because of Shakespeare's merit, but because of the merit of present music artists and the messages they intend to express. While references and the publicizing of a music *Romeo and Juliet* adaptation helps modern-day artists' popularity, the music adaptations created can stand on their own value and themes unique to their work, not on the merits and popularity of Shakespeare.

#### Annotated Bibliography

Dire Straits. "Romeo and Juliet." *Making Movies*, Warner Records Inc., 1996. *Spotify*.

<https://open.spotify.com/album/7yTjsInNdNQJAIXAboi1nh>

The Dire Straits' song "Romeo and Juliet" is a song from the band's album *Making Movies* that adapts the romance plot from *Romeo and Juliet* into a modern setting.

Through the word choices as well as the mood of the song, the song "Romeo and Juliet" uses the very familiar, canonical plot and characters of Shakespeare's play and morphs into a medium that is most suitable for popular audiences in the late 1990s. This song is a great example of how music artists adapted *Romeo and Juliet* and not only modernized that tale of two, doomed lovers for the present day, but is also a great example of how *Romeo and Juliet* and its themes have remained relevant over the course of time. I will use "Romeo and Juliet" by Dire Straits as one of various examples of modern adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* and how some songs adapt the play in a theatrical sense while others adapt *Romeo and Juliet* with brief references to the play or the use of overarching themes and plot points.

Halsey. *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*, Astralwerks, 2017. *Spotify*.

<https://open.spotify.com/album/7GjG91tyHQNGEHZKJaqOi0>

*Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* is a popular music album sung and created by hit singer-songwriter, Halsey. This music album consists of 16 song titles and was inspired by the plot and themes of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Halsey's collection of music does not conform to the traditional, once culturally normative nature of *Romeo and Juliet*'s contents, but rather focuses more on a feminist approach to the plot. *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* portrays the Juliet character featured in its music seem more in control of the events that transpire, and the emotions described in the songs than that of the traditional "damsel in distress" motif. Most notably, the album opens up with the song "The Prologue" which features a slightly altered version of the original prologue in *Romeo and Juliet*, a clear and obvious indication that the album centers around the play even though the rest of the album departs very much from the cultural norms that would be expressed in a classic *Romeo and Juliet* portrayal. I plan to use Halsey's album to show how popular music often uses literary references such as *Romeo and Juliet* to show the progress that culture and society has made since the original publication as well as express the music artist's personal views and experiences. I also plan to compare *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* to different kinds of music adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* that are less theatrical and opt to mention/reference *Romeo and Juliet* directly.

Hansen, Adam. "'Where should this music be?': Locating Shakespeare and Modern Popular Music." *Shakespeare and Popular Music*. Continuum, 2010. EBSCOhost.

This chapter from *Shakespeare and Popular Music* discusses the societal status of popular music in tandem with the upper status of Shakespeare. In detail, this source

describes how popular music, often regarded as a lowly art form, may embrace the use of Shakespeare allusions so often in order to reach a more esteemed audience. It briefly argues that popular music supports the idea that Shakespeare is universal and will remain relevant to our society for some time. It also briefly identifies how *Romeo and Juliet's* usage in music often indicates a strong, young sort of love or themes involving it. This source would be a good jumping off point for an introduction on the relationship between popular music and Shakespeare more broadly. Then, I could also implement this source as evidence of *Romeo and Juliet's* effect on modern music and the implications taken away by the audience as a result of this Shakespearean reference.

Hutcheon, Linda, and O'Flynn, Siobhan. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Linda Hutcheon's book, *A Theory of Adaptation*, goes into great detail about what it means to adapt a specific work as well as the implications of adapting a specific work into different mediums. Hutcheon's book can help me further research and support the effect of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* on popular music. Adaptor's intention and audience interpretation are two ideas that Hutcheon covers in her book. I plan to use *A Theory of Adaptation* to specifically delve into these ideas when it comes to songs inspired by Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and what message they were intended to portray to an audience. This book may be the basis for a small, introductory section I write on the role of adaptation in popular music.

Jorgensen, Estelle R. "To Love or Not To Love (Western Classical Music): That Is the Question (For Music Educators)." *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, vol. 28, no. 2, Fall 2020, pp. 128–144. *EBSCOhost*.

The primary focus of this academic essay is the role of love in Western music as well as curriculum for music educators. While the title may imply its focus on Shakespeare, the essay does not delve into Shakespeare, but rather uses this Hamlet quote as a way of guiding research questions about love for music within the realm of music education. The essay is guided by the notion that music educators'/students' should "love" Western Classical Music in the same way that other more respected forms of music are "loved." This source no longer appears to be applicable to my thesis since it hones in on love for music. If its focus was love *within* music then it would suit a better purpose.

Lindley, David. "Instrumental Music and Dance." *Shakespeare And Music*. Bloomsbury: The Arden Shakespeare, 2006. EBSCOhost.

David Lindley, a professor emeritus of music and literature at the University of Leeds, constructed this book, *Shakespeare And Music*, around the role that music played within William Shakespeare's writings. In his book, he analyzes music in Shakespeare's time period, music's presence in Shakespeare's plays, as well as the role that music and musical performance has historically played in theater performances for various different periods of time. Upon further inspection, Lindley's book may not serve as the most relevant source for my thesis, but his chapter "Instrumental Music and Dance" may be a worthwhile reference for information if I choose to delve into *Romeo and Juliet's* role in modern theater productions. The chapter "Instrumental Music and Dance" in particular discusses some of the differences between the use of music in Shakespearean theater productions versus modern theater productions. This may help me to analyze why Shakespeare is still used in modern musical theater and how modern times have altered music's role in plays like *Romeo and Juliet*.



McLuskie, Kate, and Kate Rumbold. "Branding Shakespeare." *Cultural Value in Twenty-First-Century England: The Case of Shakespeare*, Manchester University Press, Manchester; New York, 2014, pp. 210–240. JSTOR.

This chapter titled "Branding Shakespeare" goes into depth on the idea that Shakespeare is a brand. The text talks about what Shakespeare's presence as a brand in modern society means for Shakespeare adaptations and references and how this alters the consumption of these products by the public. Parts of the chapter reference adaptation studies, making this a great source to use in tandem with Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* while attempting to explain *why* as well as *to what effect* modern music adapts Shakespeare. With this source, I will be able to conceptualize Shakespeare as a brand within music and further analyze/support its impact on popular culture and the audiences that consume these adaptations.

"Music for Shakespeare's Lyrics." *Shakespeare Unlimited* from The Folger Shakespeare Library, 7 October 2015, <https://www.folger.edu/shakespeare-unlimited/music-shakespeare-lyrics>.

This episode of *Shakespeare Unlimited* focuses mostly on the music present within Shakespeare's plays as well as the sorts of music present in Shakespearean times. David Lindley, a professor for the University of Leeds as well as the author of another source I have chosen to research, is featured on this episode. Lindley wrote the book *Shakespeare And Music* and is a guest on this podcast to primarily discuss the absence of music notation in Shakespeare's plays and how actors/playwrights accommodate this lack of music notation when there are songs featured in certain plays like *The Tempest* or *Twelfth Night*. I do not anticipate focusing on music's presence in Shakespeare, but rather

Shakespeare's presence in music. Therefore, this source may not be the most fruitful for my thesis.

Newstead, Al. *Halsey's Album Is a Feminist Take on Romeo and Juliet*. 1 Aug. 2017,

[www.abc.net.au/triplej/news/musicnews/halsey-new-album-is-a-feminist-take-on-romeo-and-juliet/8764542](http://www.abc.net.au/triplej/news/musicnews/halsey-new-album-is-a-feminist-take-on-romeo-and-juliet/8764542).

This is a brief article from Triple J, a segment of ABC, that covers Halsey, a popular singer-songwriter, and the creation of her album *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*. The article features direct quotations from an interview with the music artist about what the album is about and how she incorporated the classic plot of *Romeo and Juliet* into her music.

Halsey, the singer and creator of this *Romeo and Juliet* inspired album, put her own feminist spin on *Romeo and Juliet* with the album's collection of songs about her recent breakup with a long-term significant other. With the help of this article and the interview it incorporates, I can analyze the intended meaning behind *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* and the way in which it adapts *Romeo and Juliet* in comparison to other popular music pieces.

Parker, Kathryn Roberts. "Wassailing and Festive Music in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*."

*Australasian Drama Studies*, vol. 76, Apr. 2020, pp. 158–182. EBSCOhost.

This academic essay by Kathryn Roberts Parker delves into Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and the ways in which music is implemented in the original text and plot. The writer also describes how the presence of music in *Twelfth Night* may reveal important cultural practices like "wassailing" that were present in society when William Shakespeare first wrote and published the play. This essay is no longer relevant to my thesis topic since I

have shifted my focus and the paper will be centered around *Romeo and Juliet* specifically.

“Romeo and Juliet through the Ages.” *Shakespeare Unlimited* from The Folger Shakespeare Library, 8 October 2014, <https://www.folger.edu/shakespeare-unlimited/romeo-juliet>.

This episode of the *Shakespeare Unlimited* podcast is a great summation of history and culture’s influence on *Romeo and Juliet* over time. The podcast delves into how the play has been performed and adapted over the course of time. A particular point they make is the way in which Shakespeare’s original play has been changed over and over again, often in the effort to establish a message completely unlike or possibly opposite from the original play’s themes. This episode will be a great source of information and support while discussing the more modern adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* throughout music. For example, with Halsey’s *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*, I can use this podcast as a way to further analyze *why* Halsey chose to adapt *Romeo and Juliet* in a way that expresses modern-day feminist ideals as well as queer romance when these ideas are quite opposite from the original play’s subjects.

“Shakespeare Lives - Pop Goes Shakespeare... The Bard in Modern Music.” *Shakespeare Lives*, BBC, 2016, [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/4nwSNRbP6DhyV79KgT94LTp/pop-goes-shakespeare-the-bard-in-modern-music](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/4nwSNRbP6DhyV79KgT94LTp/pop-goes-shakespeare-the-bard-in-modern-music).

This source is a BBC website page that covers the popularization of different Shakespeare works and topics within popular songs. This page offers some great examples of specific songs that were inspired/adapted from different Shakespeare works, including but not limited to: “Love Story” by Taylor Swift, “Romeo and Juliet” by Dire Straits, and “I Bet You Look Good on the Dancefloor” by Arctic Monkeys. While this

source does not specifically focus on *Romeo and Juliet* song adaptations as my thesis will, it offers a great jumping off point for many songs inspired by *Romeo and Juliet* as well as the meanings behind Shakespeare inspired songs, assisting me with the following questions: What meaning did the adaptor intend for their songs and what meaning is received by the listening audiences?

Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet* from The Folger Shakespeare Library, Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.

William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is the primary, source text my thesis will be focusing on. *Romeo and Juliet* is perhaps the most popular, well-known Shakespearean tragedy, which means that it carries a wealth of potential as a source for adaptation in the history of popular culture. I plan to use direct quotations from *Romeo and Juliet* that demonstrate the now canonical themes present in the play that have inspired so many musical interpretations and/or adaptations of Shakespeare's original work. With these direct quotations, I will be able to support the idea that the play, *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as allusions to this text within musical contexts often give off a clear theme of doomed romance, destiny, and other familiar themes throughout literature.

Taylor Swift. "Love Story." *Fearless*, Big Machine Records LLC, 2008.

<https://open.spotify.com/album/2dqn5yOQWdyGwOpOIi9O4x>

Taylor Swift's "Love Story" is debatably one of the most recognized music adaptations and/or music references to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* present in the 2000s. Swift's "Love Story" uses the names "Romeo" and "Juliet" to identify the female and male protagonist at the heart of the song. The song describes several events that transpire between these two individuals in an effort to describe a *love story* between them.

However, Swift's song does not include the tragedy present at the end of Shakespeare's original play, but rather opts for a happy ending which is a much more modern and widely accepted ending for love stories throughout popular media. Taylor Swift's song seems to use the allusion to *Romeo and Juliet* as a clear indicator that the song is, unsurprisingly, about a true love story. I think this song is an excellent source to support my claim that *Romeo and Juliet* has been established time and time again as the canon for a love story. Then, as a result of *Romeo and Juliet* being the canon for a young love story, artists over time have used references to the original play in order to establish their work as a love story to all audiences, even in the modern-day.

Viñuela, Eduardo. "Metanarratives and Storytelling in Contemporary Mainstream Popular Music: Romeo and Juliet in the Making of the Star Persona." *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*, No. 1, 2020, pp. 209-222.

This is an academic essay that delves into the concept of metanarratives, a form and theory of storytelling that experiments with the act of storytelling itself. This essay discusses the concept of metanarratives within popular music, specifically Halsey's music album *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* and Troye Sivan's *Blue Neighbourhood*. Both of these albums in particular are seen as queer depictions of Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* with modern twists on feminism and sexuality present. Viñuela's text explores these adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* and how these music artists' metanarratives of this source text embrace the defiant nature of adolescence present in the original play, but with their own twists. I can use this text as support for *Romeo and Juliet*'s continual relevancy to the modern-day. Artists adapt *Romeo and Juliet* because they are able to take central themes, like adolescent defiance and protest, from the original play and alter

them in the efforts to establish their own message. I will be able to demonstrate how music artists like Halsey and perhaps Troye Sivan have used *Romeo and Juliet* to their advantage and apply a canonical theme towards current personal and societal issues.

*West Side Story*. Directed by Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins. United Artists, 1961.

The 1961 musical film, *West Side Story*, is an adaptation of the original Broadway musical created in 1957. The original *West Side Story* production and then movie adaptation is directly inspired by *Romeo and Juliet*. The film is set in 1950s New York and focuses on lead characters, Tony and Maria, two members of opposing gangs, the Jets and Sharks. Tony and Maria fall in love with each other at a dance and are torn apart by their opposing groups. The film covers a variety of cultural issues relevant to the time of its creation such as racism, since the Jets are a white gang, and the Sharks are Puerto Rican. I think this film/musical is an important example of how *Romeo and Juliet* can be used in more modern times to display cultural and societal issues relevant in the present. This adaptation takes the idea of opposing forces established in Shakespeare's play and uses it to display issues relevant in 1950s New York, not Shakespearean times. This is what keeps *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations from being repetitive. Shakespeare's play is now a tool for adaptors to establish their own meaning within their new texts.

White, R.S. "'Star-Crossed Lovers': *Romeo and Juliet* and Romantic Tragedy." *Shakespeare's Cinema of Love: A Study in Genre and Influence*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2016, pp. 178–222. JSTOR.

This source is a book chapter from the book *Shakespeare's Cinema of Love: A Study in Genre and Influence* that covers *Romeo and Juliet's* historical relationship with the tragic romance archetype. This chapter explores why and how themes of tragic romance found

in *Romeo and Juliet* are used mostly in film. However, this chapter also delves into the use of tragic romance and *Romeo and Juliet* within popular music/musical theater to a surprising degree. This source acknowledges the impact of *Romeo and Juliet* on many different musical mediums and discusses the implications found within music that alludes to *Romeo and Juliet* and tragedy themes. I plan to use this source to explore my own take on *Romeo and Juliet's* impact on popular music and musical theater specifically. I will use information from this source to support the idea that *Romeo and Juliet* has been made into an easily recognizable way of including tragedy and romance in any sort of art form, but specifically music.

Wilson, Christopher W., and Michela Calore. *Music in Shakespeare : A Dictionary*. Bloomsbury: The Arden Shakespeare, 2005. EBSCOhost.

Wilson and Calore's *Music in Shakespeare: A Dictionary* is a source that explicitly covers the musical terminology and references found in Shakespeare's original writing as well as the theatrical productions of early Shakespeare plays. This is a very comprehensive source on the allusions to music within Shakespeare himself, but may not be the most relevant source for my current thesis topic since I am focusing more on Shakespeare's presence in popular music, not music's presence in Shakespeare. This would be an excellent source of information if I wanted to create a section in my paper specifically about the roots of music in Shakespeare itself and possibly connect that to Shakespeare's ties to the history of popular music.

## Appendix C: Presentation of Thesis Script

### *Opening for Presentation:*

“[I]f some person were unaware of its existence as a play by Shakespeare, she or he could be forgiven for thinking that *Romeo and Juliet* is in essence a musical” since “the most insistent subject of popular music composed for the mass consumption” is “melancholy love” (White 183). With a background in music as well as literature, I knew I wanted to compose a thesis on the intersectionality of popular music and Shakespeare. However, it was this exact quotation from R.S. White that made me instantly realize how frequently *Romeo and Juliet* in particular appears in music today. Immediately, songs like “Love Story” by Taylor Swift, “Romeo and Juliet” by Dire Straits, and even the musical, *West Side Story* came to mind. Melancholy love is a leading subject of popular music today, as White identifies, a subject that nearly everyone has encountered during their music listening experience. However, why does popular music continue to adapt *Romeo and Juliet*? This is a question that I, myself, and presumably many other modern-day listeners have not asked themselves. My name is Gabrielle Sheets, and for my senior thesis I decided it was time to delve into the reasoning behind the many references and adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* that we so often encounter within today’s popular music. This line of inquisition is what ultimately led me to the following research questions.

### *Introduction to Research Questions:*

1. What motivates modern-day popular music creators to adapt *Romeo and Juliet*?
2. How do *Romeo and Juliet* music adaptations express modern cultural and social issues?

### *Challenges of my Research:*

As I began my research, I quickly discovered that scholars more often wrote on the presence of music in Shakespeare rather than Shakespeare’s presence in popular music. This discovery was a



bit frustrating for me, especially since I knew from my personal music-listening experience that *Romeo and Juliet* was so ingrained in the production of music. I had a difficult time believing that scholars did not find the presence of *Romeo and Juliet* in popular music interesting.

Although, I soon realized that this lack of research was not necessarily an indicator of my topic's weakness, but rather a reflection of how new some of these *Romeo and Juliet* music adaptations were and how foreign they were to the field of literature. I also realized that many of the works of music I had first loosely thought of as "adaptations" were actually not adaptations. While songs such as Taylor Swift's "Love Story" clearly allude to *Romeo and Juliet*, they do not adapt Shakespeare's original text. Instead, these songs use the names "Romeo" and "Juliet" as markers of the "melancholy love" so often found in popular music. So, due to these challenges, I realized that I not only needed to position myself in a relatively unexplored area of research, but that I also needed to strictly define "adaptation" for the purpose of my thesis.

#### *Overcoming Challenges in Research:*

I defined adaptation using Linda Hutcheon's book, *A Theory of Adaptation*. This definition, in short, is "repetition without replication" (Hutcheon 3). Popular music adaptations for the purposes of my thesis were then required to "repeat" Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, but not replicate the text exactly. Instead, popular music creators were required to recontextualize *Romeo and Juliet* based on their ideas as a creator as well as the culture present at the time of the music's release. Then, to overcome the challenges with lack of research, I chose to focus on one music adaptation that had, in fact, undergone a lot of scholarly research and another that I was very familiar with from my own listening experience. The two adaptations I chose to research were *West Side Story*, a musical from 1961, as well as *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* by Halsey, a music album released in 2017. With a wealth of research on *West Side Story* and my own

personal experience supplementing the lack of research on *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*, I began researching how these pieces adapted *Romeo and Juliet* in order to express current social and cultural issues present at the time of the music's release.

*Conclusions of my Thesis:*

With *West Side Story*, I was able to draw direct comparisons between many of the musical's songs and scenes from Shakespeare's original play, such as the song "Tonight" (*play excerpt of song and picture of scene in film*) and the famous balcony scene. With these comparisons, I was also able to identify drastic differences between Shakespeare's text and *West Side Story*, especially in terms of how each present different forms of culture. *West Side Story* adapts *Romeo and Juliet* in a way that expresses the systematic racism against Puerto Rican immigrants present in the 1950s even though the original *Romeo and Juliet* does not include themes of race or immigration. I came to a similar conclusion after analyzing *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* by Halsey. I was able to examine how *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* engaged with *Romeo and Juliet* through lyrics, music videos, and even social media engagement. While the album's opening song, "The Prologue" quotes *Romeo and Juliet* directly (*play excerpt of song and picture album cover*), Halsey's piece could not be any more different than what was first presented as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* asserted a sense of feminism and female sexuality onto Shakespeare's traditionally heteronormative text. The renewed senses of culture found in these popular music adaptations has brought me to the conclusion that Shakespeare and by extension, *Romeo and Juliet*, continues to be a popular source of adaptation not because adaptors desire to preserve the text, but rather alter it and make it more culturally applicable to modern audiences. *Romeo and Juliet* is then an excellent source of adaptation for popular music because, as R.S. White stated, melancholy love is ever-present in popular music,

and *Romeo and Juliet* is the leading symbol for tragic love. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is thus a malleable source of adaptation for popular music artists that can be used to access an audience that is familiar with the canon of a tragic love story even when modern adaptors continue to alter the play. Music artists then perpetuate *Romeo and Juliet*'s widespread popularity but continue to replace the outdated cultural ideals within the original tragedy with modern, cultural issues that *matter* to contemporary audiences. These *Romeo and Juliet* music adaptations we continue to encounter are then established as so much more than catchy, pop songs. These music adaptations act as clear indicators of societal issues we continue to face day after day. So, it is clear that music artists will continue to adapt *Romeo and Juliet* and that the culture expressed in these adaptations will continue to change. We, as a listening audience, should then continue to listen closely and observe how music adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* reflect societal issues we currently face, issues that matter to these modern music artists and issues that *should* matter to us.

#### Thesis Presentation Graphics

“The Most Insistent Subject of Popular Music”:  
An Exploration of *Romeo and Juliet* Music  
Adaptations and Their Expressions of Modern  
Cultural Issues

Gabrielle Kristina Sheets

“[I]f some person were unaware of its existence as a play by Shakespeare, she or he could be forgiven for thinking that *Romeo and Juliet* is in essence a musical” since “the most insistent subject of popular music composed for the mass consumption” is “melancholy love” (183)

- R.S. White, a Professor of English



Wise, Robert and Jerome Robbins, directors. *West Side Story* (1961). Hulu. 19 April 2021.



Wright, John. "A scene from *Romeo and Juliet* - the balcony scene." ARTSTOR.

Bacon, John Henry Frederick. "Romeo and Juliet from 'Children's Stories from Shakespeare.'" Wikigallery.org.

hopeless fountain kingdom  
HALSEY

"The Prologue" - Halsey

[Intro]

Two households, both alike in dignity  
 In fair Verona, where we lay our scene  
 From ancient grudge break to new mutiny  
 Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean  
 From forth the fatal loins of these two foes  
 A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;  
 Whose misadventured piteous overthrows  
 Do with their death bury their parents' strife  
 The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love  
 And the continuance of their parents' rage  
 Which, but their children's end, nought could remove  
 Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;  
 The which if you with patient ears attend  
 What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend

"Halsey - The Prologue." *Genius*, Genius Media Group Inc., 2 June 2017.  
[genius.com/Halsey-the-prologue-lyrics](https://genius.com/Halsey-the-prologue-lyrics).

ROMEO AND JULIET

Shakespeare's Prologue

[Enter] Chorus.

Two households, both alike in <b>dignity</b>	1
(In fair Verona, where we lay our scene),	2
From ancient grudge break to new <b>mutiny</b> ,	3
Where <b>civil</b> blood makes civil hands unclean.	4
<b>From forth the fatal loins of these two foes</b>	5
<b>A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life;</b>	6
Whose <b>misadventured</b> piteous overthrows	7
Doth with their death bury their parents' strife.	8
The fearful passage of their death-marked love	9
And the continuance of their parents' rage,	10
Which, <b>but</b> their children's end, naught could remove,	11
Is now the <b>two hours' traffic of our stage;</b>	12
The which, if you with patient ears attend,	13
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.	14

Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet* from The Folger Shakespeare Library, Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition. **[Chorus exits.]**<sup>1</sup>