

Reviving Juliet: Adolescence and Agency in Young Adult Shakespeare Adaptations

Throughout the history of Shakespeare adaptations for children, young readers have been urged to learn from the actions—good and bad—of the Bard's characters. Girls, in particular, were targeted by nineteenth-century adapters, who offered their retellings of the plays to girl readers as a mediated introduction to Shakespeare's works. Centuries of adaptations of Shakespeare's plays across all forms of media reflect Shakespeare's historically prominent place in school curricula, and none of the plays is more familiar to adolescent readers than *Romeo and Juliet*. According to a 1989 study by Arthur N. Applebee, 90% of public school students had read *Romeo and Juliet* by the time they graduated high school. Today, even those who have never read the play are familiar with the star-crossed lovers, thanks to its ever-present influence upon contemporary popular culture.

The role of Shakespeare adaptations for children and young adults in reinforcing literary and social boundaries has been the subject of much scholarship, particularly their influence upon ideas of girlhood and girl culture. Historically, girl readers have been encouraged to identify with Juliet, and collective memory tends to focus on her romance with Romeo. We see this in contemporary young adult novel adaptations, for example, when characters have names reminiscent of the famous couple or when the (usually female) protagonist finds herself in a similarly—though not fatally—doomed relationship. However, in works like Paula Marantz Cohen's *Beatrice Bunson's Guide to Romeo and Juliet*, Lindsey Roth Culli's *This Above All*, and Suzanne Harper's *The Juliet Club*, the adolescent girl narrator, rather than inhabiting Shakespeare's plot, is an active reader or performer of the play within a school setting. The protagonist identifies not only with Juliet, but with the play's other male and female characters, and she is able to navigate conflict through her critical reading of the play. In this paper, I examine the ways in which these novels reimagine *Romeo and Juliet* as a way for the adolescent girl to explore and assert her independence both within and in resistance to her relationships with friends, siblings, parents, and other adult authority figures.