Teaching *Romeo and Juliet* in and against Modern Popular Culture
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by Charles Conaway

In Rupert Goold’s recent Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Romeo and Juliet*, the title characters, as John Lahr notes in his review of the performance, "wear modern dress throughout, while the rest of the cast is in Elizabethan costume."[1] When the play opens, he adds, Romeo appears as "a camera-toting, duffel-coated tourist, wandering through a church while listening to an audiotape of the play’s Prologue. . . . The warring families, in doublets and hose, take the stage in slow motion. By the time the Prologue is over, through the magic of Goold’s stagecraft, we have travelled backward with them to the mean streets of Verona, and the rumble is on" (74). While we seem to travel back in time to a different age, both the staging of these opening moments and the modern costumes worn by Romeo and Juliet throughout the play suggest, as Lahr concludes, that "the couple’s love, if not their context, is contemporary" (74). With this production, then, the RSC appears to have offered its audiences a series of striking tableaus in which Romeo and Juliet stand apart from their parents, their parents’ feud, their time, and their place, and appear instead as our contemporaries.
Such imagery functions as a wonderful visual metaphor for the ways in which the reception of Shakespeare's play over the last forty or fifty years, as Marjorie Garber writes, has turned it into "the normative love story of our time." But what exactly do we own when we make Romeo and Juliet our contemporaries? What are we saying about ourselves when we say that their love story is our love story? And what impact does the modern popular reception of the play have on our students, especially when we teach it, as many of us often do, in conjunction with a recent film or in reference to the countless allusions to it in other twentieth- and twenty-first-century media?

Building on Garber's ideas about the circular ways in which "Shakespeare makes modern culture and modern culture makes Shakespeare" (xiii), I will argue that the changes in the reception of Romeo and Juliet over the last half-century have affected our sense of who is responsible for the behaviors in the play--namely, the street brawls and the impetuous romance--that lead to its tragic conclusion. Specifically, I will show that at the same time that modern popular culture shapes Romeo and Juliet for consumption in and by youth culture, it paradoxically and problematically blames youth culture for the tragedies that befall the play's lovers. I suggest, then, that when we teach Shakespeare's play, we should consider teaching it both in and against its reception in modern popular culture.

Simply put, Romeo and Juliet are our contemporaries because we make them our contemporaries. Over time, through numerous readings and productions of the play,
we attempt to make Romeo and Juliet--as well as any other character in any other literary text--speak to our own changing sensibilities. More specifically, as Garber argues, we make Shakespeare's young lovers speak to our current understanding of youth culture. The play has almost always been associated, in one sense or another, with youthfulness. Noting, for example, that Romeo and Juliet itself is not a product of the period when Shakespeare is said to have penned his so-called mature tragedies, Garber reminds us that the play has often "been accused, sometimes explicitly, sometimes by implication, of the same immaturity that characterizes its protagonists" (38). Furthermore, she demonstrates that critics from the Restoration through the mid-twentieth century often complained that the actors who played Romeo and Juliet--David Garrick in 1748; John Philip Kemble and Sarah Siddons in 1789; Leslie Howard and Norma Shearer in 1936--"were often too old for the parts" (40). Eventually, young actors such as Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey in 1968, as well as Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes in 1996, played the parts of the title characters, satisfying, perhaps, this thirst for youthfulness. The age of these young actors and the characters they play, as well as the play's early appearance in the Shakespeare canon, helped to fuel and were fueled by the growing consensus of the last half-century or so that Romeo and Juliet elicits, as Garber writes, an "almost automatic modern association with youth culture" (39).
While modern culture thus makes Shakespeare and his characters our contemporaries, we seem also to have come to the conclusion that Shakespeare makes modern culture, that *Romeo and Juliet*, as Garber argues, provides the model for "the 'character of today's youth' (drugs, teen suicide, dumb parents, peer pressure, and hasty, irrevocable decisions)" (54). The problem this creates is that these modern popular associations of *Romeo and Juliet* with youth culture sometimes radically shift responsibility for the troublesome behaviors in the play onto the young characters themselves. They therefore run the risk of producing what Stanley Cohen has called a moral panic: the phenomenon in which various institutions— including the mainstream media, the church, and the state—construct members of youth cultures as "threat[s] to societal values and interests."[3] "Bishops, politicians, and other right-thinking people," Cohen argues, join the media and hold up images of youths as distinctive social types: "folk devils," or monsters, who serve as "visible reminders of what we should not be" (2). Specifically, Cohen examines the media construction of the Mods and the Rockers of the mid-1960s. When members of the rival British youth subcultures clashed in the streets of Brighton and Hastings, the media inspired moral outrage by claiming that the riots were caused by deviants. Noting that behavior of the Mods and the Rockers was little different from the behavior of members of different subcultures in previous generations, and relying on Howard S. Becker’s notion that "deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits … [but simply a] behaviour that people so label," Cohen
reveals the politics of moral panic, a politics in which the label, *deviant*, becomes "the basis for assigning social status."[^4] When members of the church, the state, and the media promote panic and circulate unfounded fears about deviance in youth cultures, they construct their own supposed normalcy and moral superiority in an attempt to secure and maintain their own power. This is not to say that people never riot in the streets, or that street riots are nothing to be feared; such behavior is, in fact, frightening. Rather, the point is that the moralists generalize, stereotype, and spread unfounded fears about youth cultures, constructing an entire group as deviant. When modern receptions of *Romeo and Juliet* suggest that the title characters provide the model for today’s youth, when they assume, that is, that today’s youth cultures are rife with teen suicide, peer pressure, hasty, irrevocable decisions, and the supposed tragedy of dealing with dumb parents, they lay the groundwork that might inspire moral panics.

Specifically, modern popular receptions of the play locate the feud as well as the courtship, marriage, and death of the title characters in youth culture itself. *West Side Story*, adapted for the stage in 1957 and released on film in 1961, rewrites the feud, setting the play in New York’s Upper West Side, where racialized, teenage street gangs of Jets and Sharks taunt each other and rumble. "Gee Officer Krupke," sung by the Jets, comically rehearses a number of probable causes for their behavior. While ventriloquizing the likely arguments of various authority figures, the Jets note that the police turn them over to a criminal justice system which passes them off to
psychologists, declaring that the boys are victims of psychological neuroses who need the care of analysts. But the analysts insist that their problems aren’t psychological in nature; rather, they claim, the boys are victims of a social disease. They need social workers who can help them get jobs and become productive members of society. But the boys claim that they are not anti-social--they just don’t want to work. Deep down inside, they insist--transvaluing and owning badness--they’re no good. Their problem-causing behaviors, in the light of such a confession, are their own. Likewise, in Baz Luhrmann’s Romeo + Juliet (1996), even though the feud is presented as a kind of corporate warfare waged between Capulet and Montague, the opening street brawl is presented with title cards indicating that the antagonists are "The Montague Boys" and "The Capulet Boys." Both West Side Story and Luhrmann's film, then, imply that the feud is not so much comprised of moments in which servants take part in a "quarrel [that] is between [their] masters and … their men" (1.1.17), as it is a situation in which gangs of unbridled youths clash violently in the streets.

Through the use of smart-aleck humor in West Side Story’s "Gee Office Krupke" and the stylized violence in Romeo + Juliet, in which "The Montague Boys" and "The Capulet Boys" positively revel in their own thuggishness, the films might very well encourage young male viewers to identify with the transvalued, problem-causing behaviors displayed on the screen. Or they might not. My point here is not that these adaptations might adversely influence young people to take up irresponsible behaviors.
The effects of texts and other media on readers and audiences, especially young readers and audiences, has been examined and debated from a number of different perspectives and has resulted in no clear conclusions. There is no simplistic model that describes the relations of power between a reader and a text. Certainly, there is no longer any firm sense that readers, audiences, and youths are entirely passive, vulnerable, and subject to inscription into the ideologies of the texts they read or consume.\[5\] Rather, my point is that these adaptations posit the ownership of the troublesome behaviors in Romeo and Juliet within youth culture, constructing young people as threats to society and themselves.

Like the feud, the love that leads to death in Romeo and Juliet has also come to be associated with youth cultures. Noting that Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are a-Changing" (1963) served as an anthem for a generation, Garber argues that, especially in Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 film, Romeo and Juliet seem to present the sons and daughters of Verona as the sons and daughters of the 1960s, who were, in Dylan's words, "beyond [their parents'] command."\[6\] Zeffirelli's lovers, she claims, like many young people of the 1960s, appear to unite over and against their parents who fail "to understand their idealistic and rebellious children" (50). Zeffirelli's film thus depicts a love and a tragic end that are situated in a youth culture that is engaged in generational conflict.

Whereas Garber uses Dylan's folk rock anthem to read the representation of Shakespeare's characters in Zeffirelli's film, Stephen Buhler traces the changing
characterizations of Romeo and Juliet in various rock and roll songs from the 1950s forward. Ultimately, Buhler examines these changing characterizations in relation to the ways in which they participate in or attempt to distance themselves from mass-market strategies. I want to build on his observations to show that even though the depictions of Romeo and Juliet in these songs have changed radically over time, they still construct youths as members of a culture that embraces and owns tragic love. Initially, songs about Romeo and Juliet demonstrate the lovers’ genuine desire for each other. Prior to the rock and roll era--in the popular music of the 1930s and 1940s, that is--Romeo had been cast, Buhler notes, as “the embodiment of suave insincerity,” but he came to be depicted during the early years of rock as "increasingly more sincere." In songs like the Reflections' "(Just Like) Romeo and Juliet" (1964) and the Supremes' "Back in My Arms Again" (1965), Romeo appears to be "devoted" and "faithful" to Juliet (Buhler, 251). He is a model for young men, and, supposedly, an attractive candidate for marriage to young women. Juliet, in this same period, appears to have been transformed from a character who was "merely reactive to her lover's blandishments" to a woman who showed "signs of increased independence and agency" (Buhler, 244). In such songs, Romeo and Juliet’s love for each other--particularly when compared to its presentation in the music of the 1930s and 1940s--was characterized as genuine and mutually owned.
In Zeffirelli’s film, of course, such young love leads to tragedy, but in many of these early rock and roll songs, Romeo and Juliet’s love for each other seems tragic-free. In other songs, however, drama, tragedy, and death become part of the allure. Blue Öyster Cult’s "(Don't Fear) The Reaper" (1976), as Buhler notes, rewrites Juliet’s ending when, instead of having her kill herself to rejoin her beloved, "the band summons up a variant on the 'Demon Lover' motif and has her Romeo appear at the window, blow out the candles lit in his memory, take his grieving lover's hand, and lead her away into Death's realm" (257). Here, Romeo and Juliet’s love remains genuine and mutually owned, but far from depicting their love as one that is tragic-free, "(Don't Fear) The Reaper" eroticizes death, and Blue Öyster Cult’s Juliet willingly embraces it. In such a light, youth culture owns a love that romanticizes death.

Later songwriters, however, implicitly critique such an erotics of death when they imagine Juliets who avoid it altogether. Buhler analyzes a number of songs by Bruce Springsteen, for example, whose various Juliets become increasingly "more assertive" (248) and "choose not to participate in the tragic sequence of [the play’s] events" (252). On "Point Blank" (1980), for example, Springsteen presents a Juliet who turns her Romeo away, having fallen for the lies that other men whispered to her. Ultimately, however, she falls victim to another kind of tragedy; she appears to have been abandoned and condemned to live a kind of death-in-life, as though she has been shot "point blank [and] right between the eyes." Likewise, on Dire Straits' "Romeo and
Juliet" (1980), Mark Knopfler's beloved turns down her Romeo, avoiding her supposedly star-crossed fate when she opts for the "economic stability [she finds] with a latter-day Paris" (Buhler, 257). But her liberty comes at the expense of her former lover, Romeo, who remains heartbroken, even when she says rather casually and callously, "Oh Romeo, yeah you know I used to have a scene with him."[8] Springsteen's Romeo is heartbroken as well. In fact both Springsteen and Knopfler present their Romeos as the kind of adoring, lamenting lover he appears to be in the opening act of Shakespeare's play, and their Juliets can be seen as cruel-hearted women akin to Shakespeare's Rosaline. Both songwriters seem to imagine the possibility of a tragic-free romance for Romeo and Juliet, if only Juliet could somehow recognize her true Romeo on "Point Blank," or realize, on the Dire Straits song, that their problem "was just that the time was wrong." Perhaps responding to the increasing independence and agency of women in the late 1970s, Springsteen and Knopfler revise the nature of Shakespeare's tragedy: love and death are not inevitably connected here, but tragedy of a different kind is nevertheless located in Juliet's choice of someone other than Romeo. Springsteen and Knopfler define tragedy as the absence of romance. In contrast to Blue Öyster Cult, they find nothing tragic in the conflation of love and death; rather, they situate tragedy in the supposedly errant desires of young women.

Other songsmiths like Lou Reed and Tom Waits respond to romanticized tragedy more directly through explicit criticism. On "Romeo Had Juliette" (1989), Reed,
as Buhler notes, critiques “the romanticism of West Side Story” (255): whatever “the woeful story of Juliet and Romeo could signify when set in 1950s New York simply doesn’t apply anymore” (256). As far as Reed is concerned, maybe “Romeo had Juliette / [and maybe] Juliette had her Romeo,” but all it ever amounted to was a situation in which “something flickered for a minute and then vanished and was gone.” Likewise, Waits "offers a critique of romanticized violence" on "Romeo Is Bleeding" (1978) (Buhler, 255). He borrows from the Beat poets, “who always looked a bit askance at their youthful successors” (Buhler, 255), and positioned himself "outside the mainstream of rock music" (255) in order to suggest that Shakespeare’s lovers, and certainly Blue Öyster Cult’s Romeo and Juliet, are fools. Waits’ Romeo is admired by all the other boys because he seems to be so tough, but they don’t see how his love leaves him vulnerable. Romeo is bleeding—literally shot through the heart, figuratively pierced by desires—and it’s killing him. Waits and Reed look at the erotics of death under a harsh, glaring light. They write songs that critique idealized, tragic romance, but they nevertheless situate it in youth culture when Waits notes that all the young boys want to be like Romeo and when Reed implies that all the young Romeos and all the young Juliets who still hope to have each other need to reconsider West Side Story’s romanticized violence.

On the one hand, then, popular music and films of the last fifty years or so have helped to make Romeo and Juliet our contemporaries by presenting narratives about a pair of lovers who are genuinely devoted to one another at the same time that they are
positioned in generational conflict and rebellion against the world of their parents. Sometimes their love seems to be free of tragedy, but at other times it isn't, and when it isn't, the love that leads to their own demise is romanticized. On the other hand, modern popular culture sometimes offers critiques of such tragedies. As is true in the case of the feud, audiences might respond to these receptions of the lovers in a variety of ways. They might identify with romanticized rebellion and eroticized death, or they might not. They might respond positively to critiques of the young lovers, or not. What is important for this argument is that modern popular culture presents Romeo and Juliet as characters—contemporaries of modern youths—whose love for each other and whose tragic ends are regarded, like the feud itself, as products of youth culture, and such a presentation runs the risk of fostering moral panics about the culture of our own students and our own children.

To say that modern popular culture constructs Shakespeare's play in such a fashion, however, is not to say that such a reading of *Romeo and Juliet* is the only one available to us. Shakespeare scholars have written at length about the process of coming of age in *Romeo and Juliet*--a process that can be thought of in contradictory ways. We might think of coming of age as a coming into difference--a difference from peers and/or parents--or a coming into sameness, as in the idea that we all become our parents. But in either event, coming of age is a process of coming into maturity, and in Shakespeare's play, the avenues for coming into maturity are the feud and courtship--
the rites of passage made available to the sons and daughters of Verona, not by youth culture, but by its adult, patriarchal culture.

The Prologue which opens the play tells us that the feud is a product of "two households."[9] It is an outbreak of violence in Romeo and Juliet’s Verona that results from "their parents' strife ... their parents' rage" (Pr.8 -10). It is, in fact, an "ancient grudge" (Pr. 3). As Coppèlia Kahn argues, "it is clear that the fathers, not their children, are responsible for its continuance. ... The Montagues and the Capulets make [only] weak gestures toward civil peace while participating emotionally in the feud as much as their children do."[10] Kahn argues that this feud of the fathers is an agent of socialization, a mechanism that enables the sons and daughters of Verona to mature into patriarchal culture: first, the feud "reinforces their identities as sons and daughters by allying them with their paternal household against another paternal household," thus defining them "in terms of filial allegiance" (6). Secondly, it offers the sons of Verona the chance to "prove themselves men by phallic violence on behalf of their fathers" (6). In such a light, we can see that when Samson, Gregory, Abraham, Benvolio, Tybalt, and others brawl in the streets of Verona, their behavior is not so much a function of their own youth culture and its supposed deviance as it is a rite of passage into what is supposedly male maturity.

Kahn pits the feud against courtship, arguing that while the feud aims to secure identification with the paternal house, "courtship and sexual experimentation ... would
lead toward marriage and separation from the paternal house" (6). In such a light, Romeo appears to be that rare Verona son who rejects (in part, at least) the masculinity that the feud, as a rite of passage, offers him, preferring his status as an adoring, lamenting lover to the fiery, quick-to-draw natures of Tybalt and Mercutio. However, while courtship and marriage more often than not result in separation from a paternal household, I'm not sure I agree that they necessarily lead to separation from the paternal house: that is, I believe that both the Montague and Capulet feud, and courtship and marriage can be seen as coming of age rituals that guide youths into maturity and paternal culture.

First of all, the discourse of love through which they court, is one that has been handed down to them through Ovid and Petrarch. Drawing on the work of Catherine Belsey, Stephen Greenblatt writes that Romeo and Juliet's love is "woven of words."[11] Juliet famously hopes, for example, that "that which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet" (2.1.85-86). She imagines that Romeo might easily "refuse [his] name" (2.1. 76) so that their love might thrive. But her efforts to deconstruct--to insist on the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified, between "thy name … [and] thyself" (2.1.80-81)--are futile given the intense social pressure of Verona's feud to prop up the distinctions between the warring families and identify Verona's sons and daughters as either "Montague" or "Capulet." Here, then, the lovers attempt to use this love woven of words to escape their parents' world. They fail to do so, of course, and
perhaps they fail, in part, because their love woven of words is thoroughly immersed in the familiar conventions of the paternal world: the conventions of Elizabethan sonnet sequences and love poetry. When they first meet, as is often remarked, they speak in the form of a sonnet, where Romeo takes on the role of a pilgrim--an adoring, lamenting lover who begs a kiss from his beloved--while Juliet readily adopts the idealized role of a saint--an unmoving beloved who nevertheless grants her lover's prayer. The effect, as Edward Snow writes, "is of two imaginations working in the same idiom, in touch not so much with each other as with similar experiences of self and world."[12] Romeo and Juliet's love proceeds through a shared rhetoric of love, and, as Mercutio indicates when he mocks Romeo as someone who is "for the numbers that Petrarch flowed in" (2.3.34-35), Romeo and Juliet are, figuratively at least, a son and daughter of Petrarch as much as they are, literally, a son of Montague and a daughter of Capulet: their love proceeds through the conventions and discourse of patriarchal culture.

A number of scholars have argued, however, that after their initial, poetic exchange, Romeo and Juliet begin to use a different rhetoric of love and desire. They attempt, that is, to distance themselves from the language of love inherited from their parents. Noting the "recoil from [the] bookishness of the rhetoric of love in early plays like Love's Labour's Lost, Harry Levin argues that after their first meeting, Romeo and Juliet "acquire together a deeper dimension of feeling by expressly repudiating the artificial language they have talked and the superficial code they have lived by."[13] This
"running critique of artificiality," Levin argues, leads the lovers away from the form and formality of conventional Elizabethan poetics (9). Snow argues that this is much more so the case for Juliet than it is for Romeo. He claims that the lovers experience their similar and shared experiences differently, and that such a difference demonstrates the gender distinctions between them. Simply put, Snow contends that Romeo’s desires remain dominated by Petrarchan conventions, while Juliet’s do not. But as Heather Dubrow reminds us, "Petrarchism regularly incorporates attacks on its own vision."[14] That is, the claim that one’s desires do not proceed through poetic conventions is itself conventional and had been conventional at least since the time of Petrarch. If, later in the play, Romeo and Juliet attempt to distance themselves from the poetic conventions they clearly invoke in the play’s first act, they only follow convention in doing so. In such a light, we can see that their courtship proceeds through a discourse passed down to them by paternal culture—even when it supposedly does not.

Just as the conventions that shape the lovers’ desires come to them through the culture of their fathers, marriage itself, as Marjorie Garber writes in Coming of Age in Shakespeare, is a ritual of paternal culture, a rite of passage that marks a transition from childhood into adulthood: "it is a sign of self-knowledge and of an acceptance of maturity ... to turn away from one's duty to a parent and toward one's duty to a spouse."[15] "Juliet’s choices," she continues, "of life with Romeo rather than with father or mother, death with Romeo rather than the convent without him, [are paradigmatic]
of the Shakespearean pattern of achieved womanhood” (40). Of course, Romeo and
Juliet’s marriage is clearly marked by filial disobedience and a denial of the wishes of
the father: as a rite of passage for women, marriage was supposed to mark the
transition from dutiful daughter to obedient wife. Snow argues that marriage was
supposed to suppress the possibility of “autonomous female sexuality and the powers
associated with it” (184), but Juliet seizes the ritual. Marriage marks her emergence into
a sexual desire which she “experiences ... as a means of action and a source of bounty”
(Snow, 184). In such a light, it might seem that the marriage of Romeo and Juliet is
antithetical to paternal culture. But Dympna Callaghan reminds us that paternal culture
is not monolithic. Specifically, she argues that in Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare
dramatizes the period in early modern history which required a “move from the familial
allegiances associated with feudalism to those identified with centralisation of the
state.”[16] In such a patriarchal culture, where power is transferred from the likes of the
feuding fathers to the Prince, "the ideology of love and marriage and the organisation of
desire required to sustain it" undergoes change (99). "The crude sexual and economic
exchange of enforced marriage," she writes, "is displaced by the concept of freely
circulating love (especially freedom of choice about one’s marriage partner)” (99). From
this perspective, in which the state, in order to assert its power, needs to be able to
overrule the wills of feudal fathers, we can see that despite her disobedience in regard
to her father’s command that she marry Paris, Juliet’s marriage to Romeo functions as an appropriate rite of passage into paternal culture.

Of course, in the end, Romeo and Juliet don’t successfully navigate this rite of passage. Drawing on the work of Arnold van Gennep, Garber notes that cultural rites of passage include three major phases: separation, transition, and incorporation or reintegration. The failure of Romeo and Juliet to be incorporated and/or reintegrated into Verona (until their death) is a function of the feud between Montague and Capulet, on the one hand, and the death drive present in the paternal discourses of romantic and courtly love, on the other. The conflation of sex and death is ubiquitous in early modern literary texts, in general: it is perhaps most prevalent in those instances in which "to die" means "to have an orgasm." In Romeo and Juliet in particular, the Prologue speaks of the title characters' "death-marked love" (Pr.9). In the play’s first act, Samson and Gregory further the connection between sex and violence when they joke about thrusting women to the wall and cutting off their (maiden)heads (1.1.1-28). As is the case elsewhere in Shakespeare, the womb is equated with the tomb; here, it is done so by Friar Laurence (2.2.1-22) and Romeo (5.1.58-65 and 5.3.45-48). In the final scene, Romeo dies "with a kiss" (5.3.120), and when Juliet takes her life, she equates death with sex by stating that her body is the "sheath" for Romeo's "dagger" (5.3.169 and 168).

Many scholars have noted the conflation of eros and thanatos in Romeo and Juliet and discussed its purpose at length. Paul N. Siegel argues that, according to the religion
of love, when Romeo and Juliet take their lives, they can be seen as lovers, who, "like
the Christian saints, [are] renouncing the world. ... [B]y going to Juliet, [Romeo] is
achieving martyrdom and gaining the paradise of true lovers."[18] So too, he concludes,
when Juliet is "awakened from a sleep that seems to be death, [she] goes to a death that
she regards as life: she kisses Romeo's lips, saying that the poison on them may make
her 'die with a restorative'" (l.66) (391). More recently, François Laroque has argued that
"Romeo and Juliet become the 'saints' of the early modern culture of love."[19] And
Ruth Nevo contends that the play secularizes the idealization of love and death when
she argues that "their death is an act of freedom and fidelity; hence an affirmation of the
reality, vitality, and value of their experience."[20] For these scholars, the conflation of
love and death idealizes Romeo and Juliet's courtship and marriage.

Other scholars have challenged this idea. Thomas Moison, for example argues
that the intermingling of eros and thanatos represents not an opportunity for martyrdom,
but a "destructive element."[21] Julia Kristeva strikes a similar vein when she argues that
love is always transgressive, that "the loving couple is outside the law, [and] the law is
deadly for it."[22] Clayton G. MacKenzie builds on these ideas, claiming that "Cupid's
capacity for destruction, a persistent theme in this play, is nowhere [more thoroughly
underestimated] than in the persona of Juliet herself"(25).[23] When Juliet thinks of love,
he argues, she thinks of "marriage, sex, children, a home together--all the things that the
institutions of a culture like Verona's would encourage young women to value. ...
Love's well-documented dangers do not trouble her consciousness one iota” (26), but such a disregard of danger proves fatal both for her and Romeo. According to Mackenzie, Shakespeare's play shows us that there is no "religion of love," there is no "life in death"; rather, Romeo and especially Juliet come "to stand for all who have surrendered or will surrender life and youth in the cause of love" (40). Finally, Gayle Whittier argues that Romeo and Juliet "are naively attracted by Petrarchan conventions"—naively attracted because “when Romeo falls in love with a love already scripted as otherworldly and then seeks to dramatize that script, he falls in to the living power of an inherited word, which, like fleshly inheritance, bestows both life and death.” It is only after consummating their marriage that the lovers seem to become aware of the presence of "death and death's companion, time" in the rhetoric of love through which they have chosen to live (37). By then, of course, it is too late: Petrarchan conventions have been internalized and the body is subject to the logic of the blason, which, as Whittier notes, "appropriates ... dismembers ... and often fragments flesh and blood" (33). Whether scholars argue that the conflation of eros and thanatos idealizes or destroys the romance in the play, they note that the intermingling of love and death is a function of some element of paternal culture: it comes from Christianity when it is borrowed from saints' lives; it is part of a discourse of transgressive romantic love; it is part of the cultural history of Love; or it is a function of Petrarchan convention. But it does not emerge from youth culture.
If we teach Shakespeare's play against its reception in modern popular culture, then we might show our students that at the same time that the play has been received and interpreted in ways that attempt to make it relevant to their lives, it has also been turned against them. Modern popular culture wrests responsibility for the behaviors that lead to the play’s tragic conclusion—that is Romeo and Juliet's courtship and marriage as well as the feud—from the patriarchal culture that serves them up as rites of passage into adulthood in Shakespeare’s play and locates them in the supposedly violent and deviant tendencies of modern youth culture. While paternal culture's rites of passage threaten Verona’s youth in Shakespeare’s text, modern popular culture constructs youths and their culture as a threat to society’s values and interests.

Such discussions might also lead to the interrogation of terms like deviance and its antithesis, normality. If the Montagues and the Capulets regard the feud as a rite of passage into male maturity, for example, it would seem conventional, normal, to them. But from the perspective of Prince Escalus, there is nothing normal or conventional about the feud. He sees it as something that has "disturbed the quiet of our streets" (1.1.84) and might very well label it as a kind of deviant, or at least, "rebellious" (1.1.74) and "mistempered" (1.1.80) behavior. In such a light, we can see that what is marked as deviant and/or normal is arbitrary. Indeed, as Cohen and Becker remind us, deviance is not so much a quality of a particular behavior as it is a behavior that is arbitrarily labeled as such, and such a deconstruction of supposed distinctions applies not only to
the feud in Shakespeare's play, but to the construction of youth cultures in our own times.

Sara Munson Deats argues in favor of teaching *Romeo and Juliet* as a tragedy in which teen suicide is presented as a response to "cold and authoritarian parents who impede the turbulent drives of adolescents toward individuation and fulfillment."[26] There are obvious benefits to such a discussion. As she indicates, too often our culture "fails to heed [the] cry for help" of troubled youths (113), and here we see an echo of Garber's claim that the play has been received as one which demonstrates that the elder generation fails "to understand their idealistic and rebellious children" (2008, 50). But my intention has been to show how Shakespeare's play can reveal to students the ways in which Verona's paternal culture, and perhaps their own, puts young men (and women) at risk by offering up rites of passage into violence and constructs desire in such a way that death is eroticized and appealing.

**Endnotes**


[24] In contrast, Snow regards Juliet's disregard for Cupid's destructive capacity as something positive. He argues that her ability "to accept the blindness of love as proper to its element ('if love be blind, / It best agrees with night' [3.2.9-10]), and welcome the disruptive energies in which it engulfs the self" is something that "makes Juliet not only a potentially redemptive figure for Romeo but a touchstone for Shakespeare's subsequent explorations of the polarities of erotic love" (176).


**Works Cited**


