

Young Adult Literary Adaptations of the Canon

Young adult (YA) literature and canonical literature occupy different cultural spaces, one the realm of teenagers, melodrama, and inexperience, the other of adulthood, seriousness, and cultural privilege. Adaptations of canonical literature for teen readers—novels such as *Little Brother* (Doctorow, 2008), *Romiette and Julio* (Draper, 1999), and *Young Man and the Sea* (Philbrick, 2004)—are an interesting convergence of these two spaces. Where adaptation is “[a]n 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, 2006, p. 8), more and more interesting examples of YA adaptations—and provocative low brow/high brow unions—are being published.

Despite the potential literary quality of YA adaptations—I am thinking of the exceptional *Exposure* (Peet, 2009) or the wry *King Dork* (Portman, 2006)—there remains a distinct hierarchy in how we treat YA adaptations. More often than not, the value of a YA literature adaptation is not its own literary moves, but rather its usability in the classroom, how close the adaptation is to the source text, and how readily the adaptation leads the teen reader to the canonical text. If we are to advocate for greater respect and work to find space for YA literature in the English classroom, we must reframe how we treat YA adaptations.

Most current discussions of adaptations of canonical literature for teen readers are about their use as a pedagogical tool, namely how the adaptation assists in teaching a canonical text. In a review of *Romiette and*

Julio, Halsall (1999) asserts that while heavy handed in parts, “*Romiette and Julio* would be a wonderful curriculum tie-in book” (p. 222). Similarly, Hastings (2004) touts *Young Man and the Sea* as “a natural for classroom use” (p. 152). In both cases, the novel’s usefulness is not only critical to their positive evaluation but also represents the reviewer’s conception of what the novel’s purpose is: a vehicle for transitioning readers toward the actual literary destination.

In fact, a variety of resources exist for the specific purpose of using YA adaptations in the classroom as support for teaching the canon. For example, Kaywell (2000) edited a collection of essays in which eight different authors offer ideas for integrating young adult literature for the explicit purpose of helping high school students read canonical works such as *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare, 1597/1993), *Death of a Salesman* (Miller, 1949/1976), and *Great Expectations* (Dickens, 1861/2001). She posits: “For many students, the enjoyable and relatively easy experience with an adolescent novel will lead to an easier understanding of the core novel, as well as richer responses to it” (p. 1). The resource *From Hinton to Hamlet: Building Bridges between Young Adult Literature and the Classics* by Herz (1996) offers similar ideas—that YA literature in the classroom makes reading fun so that the student will like reading enough to read the classics “when they are more mature readers” (p. 6). Both books take the position that adaptations of canonical literature are important if they make reading the canon easier. Even Santoli and Wagner (2004), authors of “Promoting Young Adult Literature: The

Other ‘Real’ Literature,” who suggest a respect for YA literature in their title, still fall back on the idea that young adult literature is merely a stepping stone. They note, “In addition, young adult literature can better prepare students for the appreciation and understanding of classic literature” (p. 65).

The desire to use YA literature and YA adaptations of canonical literature in this way is a fine

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enough goal; YA adaptations can serve as an interesting partner for teaching the canon. Unfortunately, this technique supports the idea that canonical literature is somehow the host and the adaptation parasitic. While most of us agree that YA literature can be used to reach students and draw them into literary conversation, and that there exists a whole body of YA literature that can stand up to

serious critical inquiry, the typical treatment of the YA adaptation of canonical literature as a ladder upwards still lures us into a space that privileges the canonical (adult) text.

Adaptation theorists—I use mostly Hutcheon and Stam here, though there are more—offer a decidedly postmodern way of thinking about adaptations that might lead us toward a more nuanced approach to using YA adaptations in the classroom. Bortolotti and Hutcheon (2007) remind us, “When we shift from ‘fidelity’ concerns . . . new analytic opportunities present” (p. 444). According to Stam (2000), the first step in this shift is to resist the “moralistic” notion that unfaithful adaptations betray, deform, or violate the original (p. 54); YA adaptations are their own work of art and should be critiqued accordingly. Judging a YA adaptation on its own terms respects it as a work of art and serves to disconnect the adaptation from its prior text.

In fact, teaching YA adaptations without their canonical inspiration can add a layer of ownership and resistance rather than a forced appreciation of the classic narrative. Whereas the latter decrees the importance of the canon from the start—this exists

before you, you need to know it, you have no say in whether or not it’s good . . . it just is—the adaptation asks the reader to reconsider the story in a new context. It allows the teen reader to enjoy (or not) the author’s engagement with a former story, resulting in, perhaps, a translation, a new perspective, a unique outcome. From translation to condensation to parody to sequels to multimedia hybrids to fan fiction and toys, adaptations take a number of forms. The further away from faithful, the more a text engages in a “demystificatory critique” (Stam, 2000, p. 63) that can be liberating in the high school classroom.

Our Biggest Challenge: The Deliberate Adaptation

When we reframe our approach to reading, teaching, and discussing the YA adaptation, we might find that our biggest struggles involve those texts that are the most faithful to their source. In fact, many YA adaptations exist due to the deliberate intention that the text will be used in the classroom. Kephart (2013), author of *Undercover*, a YA adaptation of *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Rostand, 2006), states outright: “I had always hoped that classroom teachers would discover *Undercover* and make it part of a broader curricula” (par. 5).

As Hutcheon (2006) points out, there will always be a doubled or palimpsestuous relationship between a source text and an adaptation. When the source text is obvious, it will be, on some level, the frame by which assessors process the adaptation. The cultural weight of *1984* (Orwell, 1983), for example, bears down as a standard to which *Little Brother* will always, on some level, be compared. That is not to say that one cannot consider an adaptation on its own terms, but that an adapted text is always somehow connected to its prior text, some more explicitly than others, and the more explicit the adaptation, the more difficult it is to get out from under fidelity criticism. A real challenge for us is to get beyond the ostensible purpose that a YA adaptation seems to express: YA adaptations are designed to be used in the classroom and are successful because they are useful in the classroom. Attitudes such as this are typical but problematic; this type of praise is both limited and pejorative; this type of book is in need of the most creativity when it comes to critical conversation because we must combat the attitude that the text is actually only

“good” because it is derivative.

Draper’s *Romiette and Julio* (*Romeo and Juliet*) is the perfect text to consider with these critical challenges in mind. According to Stam (2000), “[A]rt renews itself through creative mistranslation . . . a whole constellation of tropes—translation, reading, dialogization, cannibalism, transmutation, transfiguration, and signifying” (p. 62). *Romiette and Julio*, though, is, more than anything, a generic translation (Draper tells her story in prose), repackaged to reflect familiar (though not necessarily favorable) YA literature conventions, such as heightened didacticism, a happy ending for the protagonists, simplified language, and heavy-handed symbolism. Despite the fact that Draper works hard to supplant the central conflict of long-time feuding families with more contemporary conversations of deep-seated racial prejudice, Draper’s modernization—late 1990s Ohio—is only superficially reworking its source. In fact, Draper maintains the familiar structure of star-crossed lovers of feuding families whose death (in Draper’s text, it is actually the couple’s near-death) brings the families together.

Draper also maintains characterizations and names. For instance, while Romiette’s same-aged sidekick, Destiny, is not her former wet nurse, Destiny is described as Romiette’s lifelong confidante, and Julio’s best friend is appropriately named Ben. Draper frequently references Shakespeare’s play throughout the story, one character articulating, for example, “I am sure glad that this story of the Montagues and Cappelles [sic] did not end as Shakespeare’s tale did” (p. 316). Complete with a reader’s guide and a section called “Activities and Research Possibilities,” it is hard to ignore Draper’s workmanlike commitment to the prior story and her desire to lead readers to *Romeo and Juliet* via *Romiette and Julio*. A heavy-handed message against racism and gang violence is the “added bonus”; in the final scene, Julio tells Romiette, “I don’t care what color you are, or what color your daddy is, or the color of your car or your dog. I just care about you, and the person you are. I am so glad that we are both alive so that I can tell you that” (Draper, 1999, p. 320). Draper’s text, despite its repurposing, nods at the target audience (contemporary teens), but remains rooted in Shakespeare’s details.

It is difficult for a YA adaptation to exist without a sort of repurposing of the prior story to fit with the conventions of the literary category and the expected

repertoire of the intended audience. In this way, *Romiette and Julio* is an example of how adaptation of canonical literature most often manifests in young adult literature. In choosing to lean heavily on Shakespeare’s surface plot to create instant cultural capital and then diverge into didactic, problem-novel-like conflicts, *Romiette and Julio* is not challenging or complicating the prior story, and merely uses Shakespeare as a brand that will earn the text value from being faithful. While the idea of rejecting Shakespeare’s lessons does have the potential to create a sophisticated, empowered adaptation, disappointingly, *Romiette and Julio* is more invested in privileging the canonical text and then relying on formulaic, adult-centered didacticism. Existing in a feedback loop with *Romeo and Juliet* does not particularly invite critical movement.

Hateley (2008), for one, would criticize Draper’s novel for being a document merely dedicated to training readers to read Shakespeare by working the same literary muscles, not asking readers to resee the original text in critical ways, or taking them in surprising directions. As Hateley (2008) points out in *Shakespeare in Children’s Literature: Gender and Cultural Capital*,

When children’s literature is Shakespeared it not only rewards cultural capital, but also inscribes gendered juvenile readers who are made subject to a literary culture within which the Bard functions as a father figure to sons or daughters, rendering the expansion of “Shakespeare” an emphatically political act. (p. 1)

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We might consider in what ways a text engages with the prior story without inherently privileging the source, or as Hutcheon (2006) suggests, to see adaptations as a “derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary” (p. 9). Instead, we might consider *why* this text, *why* now, *why*

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this way? “What has made [a particular] story thrive in occupying a particular cultural space? What roles have adaptations played in this propagation?” (Bortolotti & Hutcheon, 2007, p. 444). What stories are being told and retold in order to “assert the basic ideology of our culture” (Miller, qtd. in Hutcheon, 2006, p. 176),

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and *how*? In other words, how might we position a particular adaptation in both the cultural context of its creation—“*why* and *how* certain stories are told and retold in our culture” (Bortolotti & Hutcheon, 2007, p. 444)—and in the web of other adaptations in which it exists? How might we promote the idea that literary conversations acknowledge multiple truths instead of one dominant truth?

This endeavor is further complicated when we consider how adaptations are often marketed to teen readers. As seen in adaptations such as *Young Man and the Sea* (for *Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway, 1952/1996), *Little Brother* (for 1984), and *The Girls* (Shaw, 2009, for *The Women*, Luce, 1998), the title alone can call attention to the “immature” qualities of the text, setting up the book itself to be an inherently lesser or a (quite literally) minor version of the source text—the playful puppy that will lead readers to the noble dog. Sometimes, the title is a line from the source text, like *Something Rotten* (Gratz, 2007) and its sequel *Something Wicked* (Gratz, 2008, for *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*) or *Wondrous Strange* (Livingston, 2009, for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*), which suggests that one small part of the original encapsulates the entirety of the adaptation.

On the one hand, these texts are calling attention to themselves as adaptations, pointing to their source text and themselves as *something like* the source text, but not the source text at the same time. This calls attention to the adaptation as plural rather than singular in meaning and has the potential to be a more complex discussion, something that adaptation theory asks critics to consider. But when we simplify this

significance as the offspring being inherently inferior, at best a straight line to the “true” text, we miss out on a potentially sophisticated consideration of the YA adaptation as a part of a web of meaning.

Assisted by Intention: Alfred Kropp

Romiette and Julio is at its best a bridge text and thus presents assessors the critical challenge of having to choose to get away from fidelity criticism. Comparatively, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Alfred Kropp* (Yancey, 2005) positions its readers in very different ways. Here Yancey creates an interesting meta-textual space for the Arthurian legend to be reimagined. Fifteen-year-old Alfred struggles with the whirlwind of information he is being asked to comprehend. When Alfred is told that the sword that he has tried to steal (and subsequently loses) is Excalibur, he at first rejects the information as “just a legend, a story” (Yancey, 2005, p. 77). Later, Alfred begins to draw from his knowledge of the movie *Excalibur* (Boorman, 1981), which he has seen “about fifty times” (Yancey, 2005, p. 116), always aware that it is fantasy, to fill in the blanks.

Here, the merging of reality and fiction is interestingly meta-textual, since Alfred is positioned as a descendant of Lancelot who this story asserts was real. Alfred is forced to resee as truth a fictional story with which he is already familiar. Things get even more complicated when Alfred is told he is wrong about the sword and the Lady of the Lake, and that Excalibur “is a movie, Kropp” (Yancey, 2005, p. 116), and therefore unreliable. From fiction to reality to fiction again, Alfred Kropp’s grasp of what is real and what is legend is being challenged at every turn. At the same time, Yancey is taking liberties with the story, too, bending it to fill his needs while asking readers to buy into the fantasy of Arthurian legend. If a person doesn’t know the story of King Arthur, he or she may still know the social significance of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table (equality), Camelot (chivalry and romance), and the sword in the stone imagery (truth and the restoration of order), just like Alfred Kropp who didn’t know the “real” version but who had a working knowledge of the hypertext through popular culture references. (Stam [2000] defines *hypertext* in terms of Genette’s five types of transtextualities as the established anterior text [p. 65].) Disney’s *The Sword*

in the Stone, Forstater's *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, Broadway's *Spamalot*, and a multitude of eponymous stories and service providers—hypertexts—keep the imagery popular and alive. Genotypically, there is a sense of openness to this text that encourages perpetual retelling. Furthermore, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Alfred Kropp* offers the opportunity to consider the often-fantastical versions of the past that postmodernity recognizes and critiques, and the counter-myth that Yancey (2005) constructs.

Some might argue that a retelling of a retelling of a retelling in which there is no concrete referent text, set 1500 years after legend says the Knights of the Round Table would have walked the earth, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Alfred Kropp* is a sequel of sorts, and as such a weaker type of adaptation because “[w]ith adaptations, we seem to desire the repetition as much as the change” (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 9), and sequels are about repetition and not so much the change. As Garber notes in Hutcheon (2006), merely not wanting the story to end is a different conversation altogether (p. 9). Or, one may argue that this is more of a spin-off or an expansion that does, in fact, offer “overt and critical commentary” on Arthurian Legend (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 171). Even sequels and prequels engage in a sort of doubled experience that privileges repetition and change, and a text like Yancey's announces itself as being in the web of Arthurian legend, complicating notions of linearity and authority. While still a part of YA literature and still playing with a canonical text, we see both how Yancey's novel lends itself to a different conversation than does Draper's (1999), and also how adaptation theory gives us the language to consider these differences.

Badmouth Betty

Confessions of a Triple Shot Betty by Gehrman (2008) places the reader in a third, different critical position. Like *Romiette and Julio*, *Confessions of a Triple Shot Betty* is a somewhat structurally faithful retelling of Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*, but in a contemporary setting (Sonoma Valley) and cast with modernized versions of the characters (in this case, skater girl baristas). What's interesting is that while it is no secret that this story is playing with *Much Ado about Nothing*—anyone who is familiar with the play will recognize the character names and story

structure—*Confessions of a Triple Shot Betty* does not depend on readers to recognize it as an adaptation, nor does it explicitly announce itself as such, which is a wholly different response to the prior text than Draper's (1999) or Yancey's (2005) novels. In fact, if read by someone with *Much Ado about Nothing* in her repertoire, this novel takes on a parodic quality.

Gehrman takes her responsibilities as an ironist seriously. Her approach is unlike many YA literature authors who imagine teen readers as future readers of the canon, readers without prior exposure to the play who will find the adaptation a bridge to the canonical text. In fact, many YA adaptations, as seen in both *Romiette and Julio* and *The Extraordinary Adventures of Alfred*

Kropp, explicitly invoke the canonical text within the plot. Another example of this is *Undercover*, billed as a modern day *Cyrano de Bergerac*, where protagonist Elisa's English class is reading *Cyrano de Bergerac*, and, with a little twist in the tale, Elisa is writing notes on behalf of a male friend with whom she is falling in love. At one point she realizes, “I am your *Cyrano*, Theo, not your friend” (Kephart, 2007, p. 88). Thus, the connections between the new and prior stories are made for the reader, demanding that the canonical text is recognized, both pointing to and depending on the source. In this way, YA adaptations often lean too heavily on the economy of acknowledgement and recognition and too little on the extended intertextual engagement.

There is a distinct difference in Gehrman's strategy. It's true, Gehrman names her characters similarly to Shakespeare's play and inserts a few metatextual moments for the reader to consider. Early in the novel, for example, an exchange between two characters calls attention to Hero's name and establishes that both protagonist Beatrice's and Hero's mothers were “totally crazy about Shakespeare” (p. 7). Gehrman also integrates a line from *Much Ado about Nothing*—“In mine eye she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on” (p. 29)—though there is never an explicit statement that the line or these names are

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from *Much Ado about Nothing*, just that they reference Shakespeare.

The association between *Confessions of a Triple Shot Betty* and *Much Ado about Nothing* is not explicitly announced, nor is it required to understand the

plot of the story, though such knowledge may make reading Gehrman's text richer. *Confessions of a Triple Shot Betty* is not exciting because it is parodic. (In fact, Hutcheon [2000] argues that parodies are no longer merely to ridicule and can instead be seen as "extended ironic structures that replay and recontextualize previous works of art" that "im-

PLICITLY reinforce even as [they] ironically debunk" [p. xii]). Instead, *Confessions of a Triple Shot Betty* as parody is exciting because Gehrman constructs a knowing audience, positioning the imagined teen reader as an assessor, relocating the reason this book exists from filling up the empty reader with things they didn't know to acknowledging the possibility of a reader with a wide repertoire, a person who reads the old and the new, the YA literature and the "adult," the popular and the privileged.

Within the story, too, Gehrman's world is one in which the teen characters are familiar with Shakespeare. John quotes to Beatrice, "I hear you're quite a brainiac . . . Here's your quote of the day, 'Lord, what fools these mortals be,'" which Beatrice easily identifies as from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (p. 86). Here is where Gehrman's irreverence for the canonical prior text is made clear. Beatrice is familiar with Shakespeare, and this knowledge is linked to her intelligence, but it's a trivial sort of knowledge that she gets because her mom was a fan and she lives in Sonoma, host to a summer Shakespeare festival. In other words, within the text, knowing Shakespeare will help Beatrice win valedictorian and a full-ride scholarship to an Ivy League college (p. 23), but it is not indicative of Beatrice's morality or how cultured she is.

In Gehrman's text, we follow Beatrice's exploits from butt clinching to exercise her gluteus muscles, to

explosive diarrhea, to the vindictive humiliation of the shallow and predatory John who she strips and handcuffs to a tree. Likewise, John knows Shakespeare only because he is a part of the Sonoma summer Shakespeare festival, a feather in his cap toward fame and fortune. In other words, even when reminiscent of Shakespearian bawdiness, Shakespeare is only a vehicle for both characters' future plans, not the end game. In addition, with lines like, "I know you're behind this, you stupid cunt" (p. 236) and frequent usage of other choice phrases like "Fuck off, bitch!" (p. 249) and "I wouldn't touch you if you were the last skanky, disease-ridden whore in the world" (p. 236), this book does not explicitly lend itself to classroom discussion.

The "why" of this adaptation feels decidedly different than *Romiette and Julio*. While Gehrman's story depends on Shakespeare's for its plot structure and characterizations, it lacks the reverence that other adaptations seem intent on perpetuating. Even though a knowing audience might have a richer experience with this text doesn't seem to detract from what makes Gehrman's novel interesting. Hutcheon (2008) notes: "We can always read these new versions without knowing the adapted work, but we would read them differently. There is a whole other, extra dimension that comes with knowing the adapted work, a dimension that makes the experience of reading a richly "palimpsestuous" one, as we oscillate between the version of the story we already know and the one we are reading now" (p. 173).

King Dork seems to operate similarly—"Oedipally envious and worshipful at the same time" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 7). Certainly, having read *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 2003) will add a layer of meaning to Portman's novel, and yet Portman, like Gehrman, does not demand reverence to the prior text. In fact, Portman's protagonist explicitly challenges "the Holden cult" (Portman, 2006, p. 12). Protagonist Tom Henderson explains his frustration: "*The Catcher in the Rye* . . . is every teacher's favorite book . . . They all want to have sex with [Holden], and with the book's author, too, and they'd probably even try to do it with the book itself if they could figure out a way to go about it" (p. 12). While Tom has read the book "like three-hundred times," he still thinks it "sucks" (p. 12). Tom's attitude toward *The Catcher in the Rye* and its institutional acceptance seems wholly irrever-

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ent, and he is playing with the idea that he has to explain this text to the reader.

What's interesting is that Portman's novel hinges upon a reader's familiarity with the reputation of the novel more than the text itself, so that Tom's seeming rejection of the novel plays out as both funny and unexpected. Portman does not depend on the structure of *The Catcher in the Rye* to plot his story, and like *Confessions of a Triple Shot Betty*, *King Dork* includes sex, swearing, and body jokes. This places both books decidedly outside of typical teaching environments, contrary to the reason so many YA adaptations seem to exist and how they are often discussed critically. This problematizes the frequently perceived purpose of YA adaptations as they so often seem to be written as a companion to the canon; it also adds another element to this conversation: how do we consider texts that are written with a knowing audience in mind and are constructed in such a way that a teen audience will have to come to the text on their own?

Categorical Pressures

The YA text that is an adaptation is its own work of art, but it is always in the middle of a dialogical conversation with its fellow hypertexts. And as YA literature, it is also always in conversation with the categorical conventions/pressures of YA literature. Because of certain expectations of what YA literature does and doesn't do (such as not condoning suicide and thus keeping Romiette and Julio alive), an author's reconstruction of a canonical adult story for a teen audience adds into the mix a critical context. Even when a text is faithful to its hypertext, we might take on the critical endeavor to consider the *when* and *where* of the text, it's new life as YA literature.

Recast with teens, set in contemporary high schools, and manipulated to fit publishing trends and the needs and interests of the contemporary reader (and often remediated, from play to novel, for example), what makes canonical literature fit into the YA literature mold can be read as a step toward what already makes the text a failure at fidelity. Beyond attitudes about the canon, YA adaptations have their own patterns that must also be considered, for it seems that even more telling than how an author's attitude toward the canon colors the construction of the adaptation is the author's attitudes about teens—both

the imagined readers and the created characters.

Generic translations are perhaps the most common in YA adaptations. *Something Rotten* is an example of this, holding very tightly to plot structure and characters, even borrowing names from *Hamlet*. But while Gratz (2007) holds tight to Shakespeare structurally—much like Draper (1999) does—he can't help but conform to certain categorical pressures. While protagonist Horatio is not in the country of Denmark, he is in Denmark, Tennessee, and what's rotten is quite literally the river polluted by the Elsinore Paper Plant. There is also a fair amount of intertextual playfulness throughout, from the Denmark community theater performing *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (Stoppard, 1994) to the entrance of Ford N. Branff later in the novel.

But the changes to the story in YA adaptations aren't just superficial name and setting changes. The course of events and final outcomes often must be stretched and altered to fit within YA literature publishing trends, too. For instance, characters are less likely to die when the story is reimaged and recast with teens. Note, for example, that usual victims—Romiette, Julio, Jake Garrett (Jay Gatsby), Hamilton Prince (Hamlet), his mother, Olivia (Ophelia)—do not die at the end of Draper's *Romiette and Julio*, Korman's *Jake, Reinvented*, or Gratz's *Something Rotten*. True, Romiette and Julio almost drown, Jake is arrested and avoids prosecution only if he leaves town, and Olivia makes herself very sick by drinking polluted water, but the star-crossed lovers are saved, their families no longer at odds; Jake is out of the picture; and Olivia is out of the hospital and walking around, happily coupled with Hamilton Prince by the end of the novel. Indeed, teenagers are often a protected class, able to repopulate adaptations but only to a point. Although Roscoe and Gilbert (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) do die in *Something Rotten*, they are constructed beforehand as "Dumb and Dumber," good ole boys with tobacco-stained teeth and a penchant for alcohol, muscle cars, and freeloading (Gratz, 2007,

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p. 51). If a teen has to die, following the logic of the least original YA literature, it will be the outsiders, unwilling or unable to conform to mainstream adult values.

Furthermore, few of these adaptations miss a chance for a didactic moment, especially about “teen

problems” like drinking, drugs, and sex. In *King Dork*, for example, unlike his best friend Sam, protagonist Tom posits that he is “the only member of the Hillmont High student body who wasn’t experimenting with anything. Other than love, literature, rock and roll, and cryptography” (Portman, 2006, p. 158). Protagonist Peggy and her best friend Mary from *The Girls* are both

virgins, and the girls who are not virgins are used and humiliated by the end. While her sisters Ellie and Georgie don’t drink at all, Abby (the Marianne character from *Sense and Sensibility* [Austen, 1811/ 1995]) in *The Dashwood Sisters’ Secrets of Love* (Rushton, 2006) wrecks a friend’s car and is injured when she drinks at a party, thus suffering a punishment for her “bad” actions.

Alcohol is also bad for Rick, the protagonist in *Jake, Reinvented* (*The Great Gatsby* [Fitzgerald, 1925/1999]), who thinks “beer tastes like sand” (Korman, 2003, p. 11). Things are more complicated in *Confessions of a Triple Shot Betty* in which Hero’s father owns a vineyard, as per the source text, and the girls are offered wine while at the dinner table with Hero’s father; this goes unpunished. Still, one shot of whiskey makes Geena (Beatrice) feel like she is “going to yuke” (Gehrman, 2008, p. 150) and the Benedict character, Ben, pointedly expresses that he drinks only water. When Amber (Margaret) drinks liquor, she is involved in a sexy photo shoot, which results in a mistaken identity that nearly wrecks Amber’s reputation and friendships.

Similarly, even though Marcus (AKA w1n5t0n) in *Little Brother* ends up taking a drink in one scene, he grabs a Bud Light because “it was the least alcoholic in the ice chest,” for, as he articulates earlier, he

doesn’t really like to drink (Doctorow, 2008, p. 158). Finally, *Something Rotten*’s protagonist Horatio makes a point of discussing how he doesn’t drink alcohol, preferring root beer instead—a fitting metaphor for *Something Rotten* and *Hamlet*: one the sweeter, less adult version of the other. Instead, the teens in these novels drink coffee as a metaphor for their maturity—on the sly in novels like *Little Brother*, obsessively in *Confessions of a Triple Shot Betty* and *The Girls*. In this way, these books seem “safer” than their referents, which says a lot about what we believe to be true about what teen readers need. As the discussion moves further away from just seeing these adaptations in comparison to the original and instead seeing them as YA fiction first—adhering more to YA literature concerns than the concerns of fidelity to the source text—the power of the original is explicitly weakened. This doesn’t say much for YA literature publishing trends, perhaps, but it offers yet another place to see these adaptations failing at fidelity and thus, at least on some level, challenging the priority and authority of the original.

From Shakespeare-inspired stories (such as *Wondrous Strange* and *Something Rotten*) to an Austen revision (*The Dashwood Sisters’ Secrets of Love*) to a reimagined Hemingway novel (*Young Man and the Sea*), YA adaptation (like any adaptation) is often burdened by its dependence on its parent text, even given its success as its own entity. On a more literal level, this same parent/child tension is a common trope in young adult literature as teen characters struggle against their oppressive parents. Not surprisingly (but doubly meaningful), in YA retellings of canonical literature, the tension between teen protagonists and their fathers is a common conflict. Sometimes the father/child tension in the adapted text points directly back to the source text, faithfully maintaining plot points. *The Dashwood Sisters’ Secrets of Love*, for example, follows the Dashwood sisters when they are forced to leave their family home after their father suddenly dies, much like the premise in *Sense and Sensibility*. Likewise, in *Romiette and Julio*, African American Romiette’s and Mexican American Julio’s fathers’ racism nods to the deep-seated feud between the Montagues and Capulets in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Even when authors take liberties with their stories, this trend surfaces. In *Wondrous Strange*, a continuation (of sorts) of *A Midsummer Night’s*

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Dream, 17-year-old Kelly Winslow discovers that she is the daughter of dictatorial King Auberon and the dangerous Queen Mab, rulers of the Unseelie court and contemporaries to Titania and Oberon of the Seelie Court. Raised as a human, Kelly must navigate the two worlds to which she belongs. She must also work to come to an understanding with her feuding fairy parents and the human woman who kidnapped and then lovingly raised her before her fairy parents' fury endangers all of the human world. In that same category, Philbrick's (2004) *Young Man and the Sea*, an homage to Hemingway's classic, adds the storyline of the titular young man's father as a depressed alcoholic whose inability to earn money is what inspires 12-year-old Skiff to catch a lucrative tuna. Another example is with Elisa in *Undercover*, a loose revisitation of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, who worries about her crumbling family and pines for her workaholic father.

The father of Jake (the Jay Gatsby character in *Jake, Reinvented*) is also so distant that Jake can throw extravagant parties without him ever knowing, which results in Jake avoiding prosecution if he agrees to live with his mother. Hamilton Prince in *Something Rotten*, Tom Henderson in *King Dork*, and Alfred Kropp in *The Extraordinary Adventures of Alfred Kropp* are all motivated by the mystery of who their fathers were and how they died. Even Marcus's father in *Little Brother* is clueless to the civil liberty violations of the police state of future San Francisco, which leaves Marcus to fight oppression unsupported. On top of that, Marcus reports, "[Dad] made me feel like he'd stopped thinking of me as a person and switched to thinking of me as a kind of half-formed larva that needed to be guided out of adolescence" (Doctorow, 2008, p. 217).

Like the "half-formed larva" of the original that an adaptation is often considered to be, the parental tensions in adaptations written for teens take on a special significance. On the one hand, this very literal anxiety of influence, as Bloom (1973) might call it, is a tension that young adult literature authors by and large cannot get beyond, which often results in a missed opportunity to tell a story the way it could have or might have been told to a different audience or during a different era. However, as these texts struggle so explicitly against the canonical source text, it could be argued that in doing so, they fail to explicitly further the source text's cultural capital—a common expecta-

tion many have of adaptations in general. In certain ways, this "failure" is potentially subversive and generative.

Adaptations that are not explicitly designed as bridges or with fidelity critique in mind do lend themselves to more interesting conversations, but that doesn't mean that texts that stray further away from the hypotext are not without their own problems, nor are they necessarily without traditional hierarchical values. Hutcheon (2006) argues, "An adaptation is not vampiric; it does not draw the life-blood from its source and leave it dying or dead, nor is it paler than the adapted work. It may, on the contrary, keep the prior work alive, giving it an afterlife it would never have had otherwise" (p. 176). She makes this assertion as something positive, but we must remember that she is discussing horizontal power relationships between source text and adaptation that are both written for adult audiences. This is, of course, a more fraught scenario when discussing canonical texts revised for a teen audience because the adaptation is done with a sense of what teens should be reading, should know, should value; this also privileges the referent text as inherently important.

Despite the fact that the situation considered here is a bit more fraught than what Hutcheon (2006) is talking about, the desire to "salvage" a story that is feared to be losing popularity with today's teen readers is often the motivation for an adaptation. *Wuthering High* (Lockwood, 2006), for example, seems to be invested in giving an "afterlife" to *Wuthering Heights* (Brontë, 1847/1996) by recreating the characters in a more familiar narrative style and setting: when Miranda starts at Bard Academy, she can't help but notice the unusual people who are her teachers and classmates. Eventually, she realizes that the handsome and brooding guy who has been following her around and calling her Catherine is a living Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights*. Furthermore, her klutzy chemistry teacher, Ms. S, is Mary Shelley; Coach H is Ernest

The adaptation is done with a sense of what teens should be reading, should know, should value; this also privileges the referent text as inherently important.

Hemingway; and Mrs. Rochester is going around campus setting fires. The school itself is situated atop “a special vault below the library [that has] the power to bring fictional characters to life” (Lockwood, 2006,

One does not have to be an expert in adaptation theories to adopt the attitude suggested here, to seek to understand the *how* and the *why* of a prior story’s adaptation, and how the adaptation exists as hypertext.

p. 191). But the characters can only move between worlds as long as people read their books. Heathcliff tells Miranda, “Cathy lives in you, and so does my soul. So long as you exist, so do I” (Lockwood, 2006, p. 256). Coming back from the dead as teachers, canonical authors such as Shelley and Hemingway are depicted as having much to teach the youth of today.

Lockwood (2006) can never be accused of writing a story that is faithful to its referent text, nor will

the plot structure of *Wuthering High* prepare readers for future encounters with Emily Brontë, but Lockwood’s (2006) literary mash-up comes from a decidedly fearful place that privileges the canon most of all: when people turn their backs on canonized authors and their characters, much is lost, Western culture is threatened. *Wuthering High*, then, reflects a different kind of reverence for the canon that even *Romiette and Julio* does not achieve, one that seeks to inscribe a value system more than specific comprehension skills.

In Conclusion

Attitudes toward the canon and toward teens demand our critical attention when we consider YA adaptations of canonical literature, and adaptation theorists give us language and perspectives to consider these texts. Adaptation theory is of course much more complicated than I have presented here; numerous articles and books exist to offer ways of assessing the adapted text. One does not have to be an expert in adaptation theories to adopt the attitude suggested here, to seek to understand the *how* and the *why* of a prior story’s adaptation, and how the adaptation exists as hypertext.

In “Charlotte’s Website: Media Transformation and the Intertextual Web of Children’s Culture,” Martin (2009) makes this point, “Each text builds on the central radial hub but adds additional threads, part and parcel of creating the larger web, or ur-text” (p. 90). If there is true subversive power within adaptations of canonical literature for teens, this would be it. To get to this text, this adaptation, this parody, before the original or after, seems to poke holes in the privileged place of the canonical text. Martin also posits that, “In the mind of the consumer there may not be a clear division between the original and adaptation, depending on which version the consumer was exposed to first” (p. 87). Marketed to teens, the YA adaptations may, in fact, be the first engagement a young reader has with a certain story—*Macbeth* in the form of *Something Wicked*, for example. Or it might be the *only* experience a reader has with this story.

While in most cases the source text of a YA adaptation cannot be ignored, the cultural power of the canon does not have to overshadow the YA adaptation; how likely an adaptation is to get readers to the canonical text should not be the only reason these books exist, nor should it be the only way these texts are evaluated. Although being a skilled reader of the canon carries with it cultural power, if we continue to treat YA adaptations of canonical literature as nothing more than training wheels for “real” literature, we perpetuate the same traditional literary attitudes that work to categorically delegitimize YA literature. It also systematically excludes teens from authentic literary discussion. In certain ways, when a YA adaptation fails to bridge, to socialize, to remain faithful to its canonical referent, the YA text succeeds as literature in its own right and allows teen voices into the conversation in generative ways.

Knowing the language of adaptation theory allows us to consider the complex web of meaning in which the YA adaptation exists side by side and not beneath the canonical piece. When we do reframe our conversations—to consider adaptations for teens as multilayered, context based, and most certainly legitimate on their own terms—we begin to see how YA adaptations of canonical texts are important parts of an ongoing text that started sometimes hundreds of years prior, and how we all have a say in how a story will continue.

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