

Shakespeare, Television, and Girl Culture

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Abstract

This essay examines representations of Shakespeare in television marketed towards teen girls, paying special attention to the way that studying Shakespeare's works is crucially associated with girls' intellectual inferiority and/or the threat of physical violence or sexual assault. The teen heroines of *My So-Called Life*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Gossip Girl*, and *Switched at Birth* — though not a racially, ethnically, or economically diverse group — nevertheless represent a useful snapshot of fictional girls on American television over the past twenty years. Using de Certeau's idea of "textual poaching," this essay explores the relationship between Shakespeare and television aimed at teen girls to suggest two related but contrasting conclusions. The first is that the study of Shakespeare in teen girl TV reveals persistent, troubling patterns of girls' intellectual, physical, and sexual subordination. The second is that Shakespeare in teen girl TV also represents an opportunity for true resistance against such subordination. The imbrication of Shakespeare with girl culture on television demands that scholars of Shakespearean appropriation articulate and theorize the consequences of depicting Shakespeare as a girl's ally as opposed to her enemy.

Blair and Serena — two wealthy, beautiful high school girls — make their way down a crowded street on New York City's Upper East Side. They are discussing their upcoming cotillion, and Blair's decision to replace her escort. She complains, "Always so brooding, so tortured. Ugh. A girl wants Romeo, not Hamlet." "Romeo died," Serena reminds her. Blair concludes, "Yeah, but he died for something exciting. And I want my debutante ball to be something to die for" (*Gossip Girl*, "Hi, Society" [2007]). This exchange, from the popular American television series *Gossip Girl* (CW, 2007-2012), illustrates the casual, suggestive citation that exemplifies Shakespeare's presence on television. Comments such as these, and episodes structured around characters interacting with Shakespearean texts or performances, are not fully *adaptations* in the sense articulated by Linda Hutcheon, who defines adaptation as "an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works" (Hutcheon 2006, 7), but they certainly *appropriate* Shakespeare nonetheless. According to Julie Sanders, "[s]tudies of Shakespearean adaptation and appropriation become a complex means of measuring and recording multiple acts of mediation

and filtration" (Sanders 2006, 62).¹ That is, especially with Shakespeare in popular culture, not all adaptation is "announced and extensive"; at times, Shakespeare appears just once or twice in a multi-season program, and thus the project of isolating a handful of scenes in a hundred hours of television demands some justification. This essay argues that we may draw meaningful conclusions about Shakespearean adaptation from paying close attention to these often fleeting or peripheral invocations of Shakespeare's name and work. In particular, I believe that the study of Shakespeare on television can illustrate the crucial ways in which Shakespeare's cultural authority is used to enforce gendered expectations and behavior within the intended audiences for shows like *Gossip Girl*: teen girls and young women.

Unlike film, televised drama does not easily lend itself to Shakespearean appropriation, in part because its organization into a dozen or more episodes per season (and the market demands of a profitable multi-season run) resist Shakespeare's five-act, "two hours' traffic" structure. Some recent scholarship on televised Shakespearean appropriation, such as that of Laurie E. Osborne, locates important exceptions to this generalization, including made-for-TV adaptations of Shakespeare plays like *King of Texas* and the Canadian cult hit *Slings and Arrows* (Osborne 2008a, 2011). Frank Underwood, the conniving protagonist of the Emmy award-winning Netflix series *House of Cards*, has garnered several comparisons to Shakespeare's Richard III, and the association seems to be an effective means of marketing a political series with an unrepentant villain at its core.² These examples of "televised Shakespeare" are not the norm, however. More commonly, television programs employ what Douglas Lanier calls "popular citation" of Shakespeare, in which Shakespeare's name is more valuable than specific elements of plot structure or character motivation:

When popular culture cites Shakespeare, the overriding concern is often not what the passage "really" means. Rather, it is often more focused on passages as instances of Shakespeare's cultural authority, his privileged place in a system of cultural stratification. (Lanier 2002, 53)

In her study of Shakespearean-themed episodes of British television programs, Sarah Olive coins the term "incidental appropriation" to highlight the absence of a structural connection between the series as a whole and its brief foray into a Shakespearean plot. Like Lanier, Olive encourages us to recognize that, "[u]nlike adaptations of the plays or biopics of Shakespeare's life, these programs do not seek to rework his plays or his life story in any holistic way" (Olive 2013). Such incidental appropriations are occasioned, she argues, by an effort to yoke Shakespearean cultural authority to an individual or group not normally associated with such authority. In these

episodes, we glimpse "brief moments in which the scriptwriting writes back to Shakespeare to better represent oppressed or marginalized groups" (Olive 2013). I find both terms — popular citation and incidental appropriation — useful in the study of Shakespeare on television aimed at teen girls. Olive's is perhaps more accurate in denoting what actually *happens* in these brief episodes, whereas Lanier's term is more evocative in connoting what *motivates* such intersections of Shakespeare and popular media. Because my interests lie partly in the common tropes and repeated "scripts" of Shakespearean citation in popular culture, in this essay I will use the term "popular citation" to emphasize the palimpsestic nature of televised Shakespeare plots, which gain cultural authority from each other as well as from Shakespeare.

Both Lanier and Olive identify the process by which a program appeals to Shakespeare's privileged status to validate narrative or emotional elements of a contemporary plot. Nowhere is this phenomenon more visible than in television marketed towards teen girls. This is perhaps unsurprising because teenagers are likely Shakespeare's largest audience in the present-day United States, given his unshakable dominance in high school English classrooms. Of the ten most commonly taught books in high school English classrooms, four (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Julius Caesar*) were written by Shakespeare, with *Romeo and Juliet* leading the pack. About 90% of high school students in the U.S. will read *Romeo and Juliet* before graduating (Applebee 1989). And studying, performing, fantasizing about, or rejecting a Shakespearean text has become a powerful, recurring motif of televised dramas specifically marketed towards girls.

Programs such as *Gossip Girl*, *My So-Called Life*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *Switched at Birth* — each of which focuses on female protagonists of about fifteen to seventeen years at the start of the show — repeatedly place their heroines in close proximity to Shakespeare as an object of study or performance. On the surface, there is little diversity among the girls of these series (they are all straight, most are white, and all are privileged economically), but they occupy a range of fantasies about girlhood in the popular culture of the past twenty years: Angela Chase of *My So-Called Life* is a shy outsider who catches the eye of the most attractive boy in school; Buffy Summers is secretly a superhuman vampire slayer; Rory Gilmore is as much a friend as a daughter to her single mother; Blair Waldorf and Serena van der Woodsen of *Gossip Girl* are fabulously wealthy, beautiful, and ambitious. When Bay Kennish and Daphne Vasquez — accidentally switched at birth — finally meet, they discover in one another confirmation of their adolescent anxieties of not belonging as well as an opportunity to find a "new" family without letting go of the "old" one. While such heroines do not necessarily represent the experiences of actual high school-aged girls, these programs have a significant impact on contemporary girl culture nevertheless because they each return to key fears and fantasies of girlhood, including

sex (especially the loss of virginity), relational aggression (i.e., bullying), parental conflict, and academic success. When Shakespeare is used to legitimize such fears and fantasies, his name authorizes an expansive and not altogether optimistic view of contemporary girlhood.

My interest is in the narrative tropes common to Shakespeare plots on television aimed at girls. In this essay, I will identify a few recurring elements that characterize the popular citation of Shakespeare by these five television programs and explore some of the ways in which these shared tropes most commonly contribute to Shakespeare's cultural capital, as his name and works become instruments of girls' intellectual, physical, and sexual subordination. My aim is to illustrate how the idea of "Shakespeare" operates within this specific manifestation of popular culture and, particularly, how this form of Shakespearean citation shapes popular representations of girls and girlhood. My argument suggests two related but contrasting conclusions. The first is that the study of Shakespeare in teen girl TV reveals persistent, troubling patterns of girls' intellectual, physical, and sexual subordination. The second conclusion is that Shakespeare in teen girl TV also represents an opportunity for true resistance against such subordination. The imbrication of Shakespeare with girl culture on television (and on film, and in the classroom) demands that scholars of Shakespearean appropriation articulate and theorize the consequences of depicting Shakespeare as a girl's ally, as opposed to her enemy.

Shakespeare and/in/as Girl Culture

There is nothing new about linking Shakespeare and conceptions of girlhood in the popular imagination, nor is it a revelation to say that Shakespearean appropriation aimed at girls and young women has a particular focus on silencing girls' voices, disciplining girls' sexuality, or discouraging girls' intellectual development. Scholars have identified this process in the early nineteenth-century editions of Shakespeare engineered specifically for children, such as Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* and Thomas and Henrietta Bowdler's *The Family Shakespeare* (both first published in 1807). The Lambs' volume, for example, rewrote excerpts of Shakespeare's plays as prose "tales" intended to educate young people on both Shakespeare and codes of appropriate gendered behavior. The *Tales* assumed that girls would identify with characters like Juliet, and the plays were revised accordingly to shape and redirect this identification in such a way that reinforced gender and social norms. According to Jean I. Marsden, comic subplots and bawdy, humorous characters were omitted from each tale, with the effect of emphasizing the love story and thus unequivocally asserting heterosexual love and romantic fitness to be the chief concern for girls (Marsden 1989, 52). Marsden notes that the Lambs' description of Juliet talking with Romeo on the night of their first meeting highlights her unseemly boldness, and the tale quickly

moves to scolding young women for similar behavior (Marsden 1989, 56). Not only were girls in 1807 taught to identify explicitly with Juliet, but they were also simultaneously admonished for doing so; Shakespeare was a potent cultural medium through which rules of gendered decorum and expectations for girls' inherent weakness and failure were transmitted. The *Tales* were effective in this practice not simply because they explicitly dictated morality, but also because the medium — Shakespeare — was already a powerful source of intellectual, national, and aesthetic authority. *The Family Shakespeare* similarly advanced this point, removing perceived "indecent" and "profaneness" from selected works, so that a gentleman reading aloud the plays to a "company of ladies" may do so without raising "a blush on the cheek of modesty" (Bowdler 1863, viii). Despite potential "defects," Bowdler's volume attests to the fact that the complete omission of "Shakespeare, inimitable Shakespeare, [who] will remain the subject of admiration as long as taste and literature shall exist" (Bowdler 1863, vii) from the education of young people would be unacceptable. Shakespeare's plays may be a bit dangerous, but they are necessary; the authority afforded to Shakespeare as a literary icon (even and especially when his words are radically revised, rewritten, and reimagined) becomes, in turn, a potent source of discipline deployed to define and police gendered behavior.

This tradition persists in the antagonistic (but not always ideologically opposed) relationship between teen Shakespeare films since the early 1990s and scholars of Shakespeare and pop culture. Lanier has called Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *Romeo + Juliet* "the most influential Shakespeare film of the 1990s" (Lanier 2002, 48), largely because it so effectively targeted teen audiences and therefore paved the way for the explosion of youth market Shakespeare films that followed, including *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), *Never Been Kissed* (1999), *Romeo Must Die* (2000), *Get Over It!* (2001), *Lost and Delirious* (2001), *O* (2001), *She's the Man* (2006), *Warm Bodies* (2013), and the newest *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Carlo Carlei (2013). With the exception of Luhrmann and Carlei's films, these productions contain little to no Shakespearean dialogue at all, collectively representing what Lanier calls a "post-textual" Shakespeare, "a collection of narratives highly mobile from context to context, verbal style to style, genre to genre, media platform to platform" (Lanier 2010; 106, 107). By articulating the definition of "Shakespeare" in this way, scholars have been able to explore how Shakespeare's cultural authority can be used to sanction various aspects of twentieth and twenty-first century youth culture, even in productions that do not overtly announce or acknowledge their association with Shakespeare. The study of teen Shakespeare films also works the other way, as Michael D. Friedman has observed: "Far from 'dumbing down' Shakespeare, teen adaptations of his plays can offer new and important ways to perceive the significance of his dramatic efforts and their

implications for modern times" (Friedman 2008, 5). Youth market Shakespeares thus comprise a crucial arena for Shakespeare's cultural authority today, and are no longer marginal to the study of Shakespeare in contemporary media and performance.

Films like *10 Things I Hate About You* and *She's the Man*, furthermore, have garnered significant attention from feminist critics, at least in part because the plays upon which they are based — *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Twelfth Night*, respectively — are so often invoked in discussions of Renaissance attitudes towards women. Both films are set in upscale, suburban American high schools, and both reframe Shakespeare's play as a coming-of-age narrative that demands a young woman alter her demeanor in some way to find romantic fulfillment. The protagonists of both films are smart (Kat, in *10 Things*, is accepted at Sarah Lawrence College), talented (Viola, in *She's the Man*, is an excellent soccer player), and starlet-beautiful; they have a great deal in common, therefore, with most of the characters from *Gossip Girl* or *Switched at Birth*. I will not analyze these films in any detail here, but because my interest in this essay is in representations of girls, I want to at least note some common themes among studies that focus on gender in teen Shakespeare films. Osborne, Richard Burt, Elizabeth Klett, Jennifer Clement, and L. Monique Pittman have argued that *10 Things I Hate about You* and *She's the Man* perform a feminist bait-and-switch (Burt 2002, Clement 2008, Klett 2008, Osborne 2008b, Pittman 2004, 2011). The films establish their heroines as bright and independent, with a cause worth fighting for — in Kat's case, speaking out against misogyny and starting a rock band; for Viola, showing she is good enough on the soccer field to compete against the boys. Yet both films conclude by insisting that their heroines cannot be happy until they comply with the very same gender norms that they resisted in the beginning. According to Pittman, *10 Things* and *She's the Man* demonstrate a "conservative construction of gender . . . a formulation interconnected with the films' imagining and positioning of 'Shakespeare' within their controlling narratives" (Pittman 2011, 100). For Pittman, the "fragmentation" of Shakespearean plots in these adaptations is reflected in the heroines' crises of identity.

Melissa Jones takes a different view of the use of Shakespeare — as a panacea that can be "prescribed for any academic abrasion to salve and soothe contending political positions" (Jones 2004, 143) — but similarly concludes that the film *10 Things I Hate about You* supplies a "soothing" dose of Shakespeare to authorize a conservative view of girlhood. Clement takes this argument a step further to point up the explicit ways that films for the teen market "authorize a 'postfeminist' view of society and to suggest that feminism is outdated, irrelevant, and even harmful" (Clement 2008). By attending to questions of gender in teen films like these, such scholarship reminds us that Shakespeare wields significant, and not always positive, power in popular culture for and about

girls.³ While many of these scholars link cinematic and televisual Shakespeares rhetorically in their work, few actually discuss the citation of Shakespeare on TV. Indeed, a brief moment such as Alicia Silverstone's *Clueless* character remembering Mel Gibson's *Hamlet* has garnered far more critical attention than all of the episodes I discuss below (of course, *Clueless* is itself a teen adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma*). It seems that television for teens is even lower on the cultural scale than teen films.

No analysis of Shakespeare in contemporary girl culture would be complete, of course, without at least some mention of Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, which was first published in 1994 and spent three years on the *New York Times*' nonfiction bestseller list in the late 1990s. Pipher's book made a powerful argument for the idea that girls' adolescence was a period of vulnerability and crisis characterized by fragmentation and, like the television programs under consideration here, problematically drew upon Shakespeare's cultural prominence to lend authority (through the reference to *Hamlet*) and gravity (by invoking the image of the drowned Ophelia) to her project. *Reviving Ophelia* sparked a widespread cultural association between teen girls and Shakespeare's character, inspiring later books like *Ophelia Speaks* (edited by a then-teenage girl), *Ophelia's Mom*, and *Surviving Ophelia*. In the words of Jennifer Hulbert, Pipher "created a new prevailing metaphor for the experience of the American teenage girl; Ophelia inadvertently became the Shakespearean spokeswoman for a generation" (Hulbert 2006, 200). The coincidence of Pipher's book with Luhrmann's film and those that followed suggests a compelling (if deeply troubling) narrative of girlhood in popular culture since the mid-1990s as defined by tropes of victimhood and fragmentation and authorized by Shakespeare. Even if we — as girls, women, teachers, and scholars — reject this narrative in our own experiences, its pervasiveness in popular media demands that we take a closer look at the authorizing function of Shakespeare within girl culture.

Shakespeare: A Girl's Enemy

Lanier (among others) has usefully engaged Michel de Certeau's idea of "textual poaching" to describe certain manifestations of Shakespeare in popular culture. For de Certeau, influential texts are the domain of privileged readers, whose work it is to limit access to and interpretation of those texts. Thus reading can be an exercise in transgressing such limits, a form of *poaching*: "the text becomes a cultural weapon, a private hunting reserve, the pretext for a law that legitimizes as 'literal' the interpretation given by *socially* authorized professionals and intellectuals" (de Certeau 1984, 171). It would be difficult to imagine a more "elite" text (in this sense) than the works of Shakespeare, and harder still to imagine a more striking example of textual

poaching than using Shakespeare to frame a story about a fifteen-year-old girl unable to choose between passing geometry and making out with a cute boy in the boiler room.⁴ In this way, the appearance of Shakespeare in *My So-Called Life* (ABC, 1994-1995), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB/UPN, 1997-2003), *Gilmore Girls* (WB/CW, 2000-2007), *Switched at Birth* (ABC Family, 2011-present), and *Gossip Girl* might be seen as an act of resistance, in which the cultural authority of Shakespeare is irreverently employed to express the concerns of a marginalized population not typically associated with a social/intellectual elite. I will complicate such a conclusion below, but first we must explore how the girls of these television programs participate in the anarchic textual poaching of Shakespearean authority.

From each of the five programs listed above, I have selected one episode that focuses in some way on the heroine's proximity to the study of Shakespeare. In *Buffy*, the heroine and her friends are shown in an English classroom discussing *The Merchant of Venice*. It is the heroine's love interest, Jordan Catalano, who studies Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130" in *My So-Called Life*. In *Gilmore Girls* and *Gossip Girl*, the heroines face an academic challenge when a Shakespeare class threatens their perfect GPA and, ultimately, their chance of attending an elite university. In *Switched at Birth*, Daphne is cast as Juliet in a school production of *Romeo and Juliet*, but abandons the role mid-performance to incite a student protest against the school board's closing of her school. The role that Shakespeare plays in each episode is slightly different, but each program frames the heroines' trajectory in the episode in relation to Shakespeare as an object of study and a measure of academic success.

Crucially, Shakespeare appears repeatedly as an insurmountable obstacle between the heroine and her dream of admittance to an Ivy League University. The episode "The Deer Hunters," from season one of *Gilmore Girls* (2000), portrays the normally confident and independent Rory Gilmore shaken by two academic failures: a grade of "D" on her essay and a massive exam that she ultimately misses because her all-night studying resulted in oversleeping. The essay and exam are in her Shakespeare class, of course, and the episode centers on Rory's struggle with the subject in general and what the teacher calls the "dreaded test." "Shakespeare!" he exclaims, gesturing to a life-sized poster on the wall. "The man we've been droning on about for the past three weeks finally comes back to haunt us on Friday." Rory's mother, teacher, and principal ultimately come to the conclusion that her poor performance in this one class (even though she has just transferred to the school) might indicate that she will not be capable of attending Harvard, which has been her lifelong dream. In "You've Got Yale!" from season two of *Gossip Girl* (2009), the rich, spoiled Blair Waldorf enacts a nearly identical plot, in which her goal of attending Yale is threatened when

she receives a "B" from her Shakespeare teacher (in a moment of exquisite self-referentiality, Blair admits that she was so nervous about hearing from Yale admissions that she stayed up all night watching *Gilmore Girls*). Ultimately, the girls' fates are not what they had hoped, although they both get their wish of attending an Ivy League institution: Rory eventually chooses to attend Yale, not Harvard; Blair is first waitlisted and then rejected from Yale after it is revealed that she plotted to have her Shakespeare teacher fired in retaliation (she ends up at Columbia). In both programs, these otherwise smart and capable heroines are nearly destroyed by their Shakespeare class, as though his is the only name powerful enough to guarantee their failure.

The idea that Shakespeare poses some kind of danger is presented with higher stakes in season one of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In "Out of Mind, Out of Sight" (1997), the study of *Merchant of Venice* in Buffy Summers's English class initiates a plot that results in a threat against her life and the lives of several friends. The episode begins with Buffy's English teacher reciting Shylock's lines: "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" (*The Merchant of Venice*, 3.1.60-63). Ms. Miller goes on to ask, "How does what Shylock says here about being a Jew relate to our discussion about the anger of the outcast in society?" The conversation that follows, during which Ms. Miller prompts the class to feel empathy for Shylock as an outsider who has "suffered," frames the rest of the episode in which an invisible being attempts to maim and kill the newly elected May Queen (named Cordelia), Ms. Miller, several popular students, and Buffy herself. This invisible "outsider," we learn, was once a shy, unpopular girl named Marcie; her exclusion from the high school social scene caused her supernatural invisibility. The discussion of Shakespeare's text thus invites us to identify with Marcie as an outsider whose anger at high school "society" is justified, only to switch our allegiance to Buffy when Marcie drugs her and Cordelia and attempts to mutilate their faces.

In "Self-Esteem," from the first and only season of *My So-Called Life* (1994), the protagonist Angela is struggling in her geometry class because she consistently skips review sessions in favor of secret trysts with Jordan Catalano in the school basement. Jordan wants to keep their meetings a secret; it becomes clear that he is embarrassed by his attraction to the shy, awkward Angela (when his friend sees him emerging from the boiler room and asks who was in there, Jordan replies, "Just a girl . . . Nobody").⁵ Angela willfully ignores the humiliating reality of their situation because she thinks Jordan's insistence on secrecy is romantic; instead, she fantasizes about him to the degree that she cannot concentrate on any of her school work. It is Jordan (who, we have already learned, has a learning disability and is nearly illiterate) who endures boring lectures on Shakespeare's sonnets

throughout the episode. In the end, hearing "Sonnet 130" read aloud brings him to the realization he can at least acknowledge Angela in school. "What kind of girl is Shakespeare describing here?" Mr. Katimsky, the English teacher, asks. "Is she the most beautiful girl?" Brian, a young man as desperate for Angela as she is for Jordan, responds:

Brian: No . . .

Mr. Katimsky: So he's not in love with her?

Jordan (with a look of surprise): Yeah. He is . . .

Mr. Katimsky (excitedly): Why is he in love with her? . . . What is it about her?

Brian: She's not just a fantasy. She's got, like, flaws. She's real.

Mr. Katimsky: Thank you.

The teacher looks crestfallen in his final "Thank you," as though Brian's interruption had prevented Jordan from truly connecting with Shakespeare (and, for a brief moment, with school). Shakespeare triumphs nevertheless: in the next scene, Jordan grabs Angela's hand — in full view of their friends — as he leads her to the basement.

As examples of textual poaching, these episodes do create some space for representing the young heroines as asserting their subjectivity and resisting expectations of gendered behavior. Jordan slips a note into Angela's locker; in a moment of anger, Angela reminds him that he can't even spell her name correctly. Buffy, of course, has superhuman fighting capabilities that enable her to defeat the diabolical Marcie and save her friends. Despite arriving late to the test, Rory is shown as having mastered a vast array of Shakespearean minutiae, and Rory's confidence in her ability to go to Harvard is not shaken by this academic setback. And *Gossip Girl's* Serena — not Blair — is newly invigorated by her studies under Ms. Carr's tutelage; according to Serena, the new Shakespeare teacher is the first teacher ever to "take [her] seriously." In each case, the Shakespeare plot offers a brief opportunity to showcase girls' intelligence, confidence, and resilience in the face of adversity. More broadly, as I mentioned above, the citation of Shakespeare succeeds in legitimizing the heroines' social struggles, along with the very concept of girlhood, as a site of human experience and study.

While Shakespeare *can* operate as a sign of cultural authority lending gravity to the decisions of teen girls, it typically serves as a marker of their inevitable failure. This becomes clear when we consider these episodes as a group. Each episode imagines an impenetrable, monolithic "Shakespeare" whose looming presence (in the form of posters in classrooms and hallways, marble busts on the teacher's desk, heavy books, and lines written on the chalkboard) poses a threat to girls' academic goals and success. This is made explicit in the cases of Rory Gilmore and Blair

Waldorf, who cannot succeed in their Shakespeare classes despite a stellar record of intellectual achievement. It is geometry, and not English, that may undo Angela Chase, but Jordan's revelation with "Sonnet 130" guarantees that she will not attend any future geometry review sessions and will likely fail the imminent midterm. In a different vein, Buffy Summers does not seem to care about Shakespeare one way or another, but the *Merchant of Venice* lesson ultimately puts her at greater risk to Marcie's plan since she has gained empathy for the invisible "outsider." In their final showdown, Buffy even borrows from Ms. Miller's assessment of Shylock: "You know, I felt really sorry for you. You've suffered." Any such emotion — even if prompted by Shakespeare himself — ultimately puts the vampire slayer at a disadvantage.

The Shakespeare plots in these teen television programs reveal other meaningful echoes. Each of these programs also suggests that, while studying Shakespeare makes the heroines uniquely vulnerable to failure, boys and bullies (and boy bullies) are particularly empowered by the heroine's failures. Buffy Summers and Rory Gilmore are bullied mercilessly for being new and different; Cordelia calls Buffy and her friends a "social leper colony," and Rory's new classmate Paris brags loudly about receiving an A on her Shakespeare paper while suggesting that Rory won't be able to handle private school. Both bullies similarly use Shakespeare as a source of their power, as when Cordelia basks in the generous praise from Ms. Miller for her inane observations on Shylock ("With Shylock, it's *whine, whine, whine*, like the whole world is about him") or when Paris sneaks up on Rory and recites "Sonnet 116" with relish before hissing, "you're going down." Angela Chase acknowledges her academic descent in a voiceover that identifies her desire to relinquish academic success to boys in her class:

In geometry, I felt like a criminal. I missed every review session, so I tried to be invisible. It's surprisingly possible. You just sit in the back and keep quiet, and let the boys shout out the answers, which they will, even if they're wrong. Boys are less afraid of being wrong.

In their Shakespeare class, Jordan and Brian have moments of revelation in which Shakespeare truly "speaks" to them — no such connection for Angela, who is willing herself to be invisible, like the evil Marcie. These plots reiterate a key message: Shakespeare signals the vulnerability of the heroine alongside the empowerment of the episode's antagonist.

Perhaps the most disturbing case of this dynamic occurs in *Gossip Girl*, in which Ms. Carr, the Shakespeare teacher, becomes Blair's outright enemy. Blair embarrasses Ms. Carr by inviting her to dinner at a closed restaurant; in response, the teacher informs the headmistress and has Blair removed from the waitlist at Yale. The conflict escalates as Blair starts rumors about an affair between Ms. Carr and Serena's boyfriend. When Ms. Carr is fired, she retaliates by actually

initiating an affair with the young man. Both Blair and Serena lose to this woman, armed as she is with Shakespearean authority. The notion that Shakespeare plots improve the fortunes of *Gossip Girl's* boys at the expense of their female classmates is further illustrated by a parallel, multi-episode arc involving the antihero Chuck Bass, whose father's death is followed by a plot by his villainous uncle to usurp Chuck's inheritance as head of "Bass Industries." This *Hamlet*-infused storyline is resolved when Chuck enlists the help of his widowed stepmother to oust his uncle successfully from the family business.⁶ While *Gossip Girl's* heroines are ultimately powerless against Shakespearean authority in the figure of Ms. Carr (who exerts both academic and sexual control over them), male characters like Chuck Bass are ultimately liberated and stronger — and much, much, wealthier — because they are allowed to triumph over the Shakespeare plot.

Shakespeare: A Girl's Ally

The ABC Family drama *Switched at Birth* falls right in line with the common generic tropes of TV aimed at girls, using an outlandish premise to explore common experiences in the lives of teens. In the series pilot, Bay Kennish, a dark-haired, sarcastic street artist in a family of strawberry-blond athletes, investigates her hunch that she was adopted only to discover — to her whole family's surprise — that she was switched at birth as a result of a hospital accident. She and her family locate the other girl involved in the switch, Daphne Vasquez, and quickly establish a complicated relationship with her and her mother, Regina. The series emphasizes the similarities between each girl and her biological parents; Bay and Regina are cynical, standoffish, and artistic, whereas Daphne and the Kennishes are uniformly sunny, trusting, and excellent at sports. At every opportunity, however, the program points up the class distinction between the Kennish and Vasquez families. Regina raised Daphne as a single mother and, although she worked steadily as a hairdresser, struggled to make ends meet (at one point, Daphne admits, the two lived briefly in their car). John Kennish is a wealthy former Major League Baseball player, and their enormous family estate includes an art studio for Bay and a beautiful guesthouse, into which Daphne and Regina move when they realize they cannot make rent. The primary distinction between the ways in which the two girls were raised, however, is that Daphne contracted meningitis at age three and became deaf as a result; she speaks and reads lips, but she and her mother communicate largely through American Sign Language (ASL).

Switched at Birth explores all the usual emotional minefields of high school: broken curfews, slipping grades, safe sex, the prom. But the program also deals extensively and sensitively with issues of girls' subjectivity and sense of identity, especially in terms of class, ethnicity, and disability. Bay is delighted when she realizes she can now refer to herself as a "Latina artist" —

Regina is half Puerto Rican — just like her hero, Frida Kahlo. When she uses a fake ID to buy alcohol, however, she is surprised to learn that her artistic, open-minded biological mother comes down hard on her; as a recovering alcoholic now sober for ten years, Regina insists that Bay is genetically predisposed to abuse alcohol and therefore cannot experiment as other young people may. Daphne cherishes her warm, lively, welcoming new family, complete with a father, stay-at-home mother, and brother willing to shoot hoops with her well into the night. At the same time, she resents their attempts to use money to make up for lost time; within days of first meeting, they offer to pay for an expensive private school and a cochlear implant. The Kennishes' gradual acceptance of Daphne's deafness and deaf culture highlights (sometimes quietly, sometimes overtly) one of the series' core concerns: would Daphne still be deaf if she were raised by the Kennishes? *Switched at Birth* offers a unique perspective on girl culture, one defined by intersectionality and the celebration of forms of self-expression not usually represented in teen TV. For this reason, such a program — while not fundamentally different in scope and audience from shows like *My So-Called Life* and *Gossip Girl* — represents a possibility for intermedial engagement with Shakespeare that does not default to girls' physical, intellectual, or sexual subjugation.

Switched at Birth seems, at first, poised to replicate all the tropes of girls made vulnerable by Shakespeare on teen TV. Bay and Daphne do not encounter Shakespeare in the classroom until season two. Bay has joined Daphne at the Carlton School for the Deaf as part of a pilot program in which a few hearing students take their high school classes in ASL. In "Uprising" (2013), Daphne is cast as the lead in the school's production of *Romeo and Juliet*. As Juliet, however, Daphne must play opposite Noah, Bay's new boyfriend. A fledging romance between the two young people playing Romeo and Juliet thus threatens to disrupt Daphne's family life, as Daphne must choose between family and a new romantic interest. Daphne is deprived of exploring her feelings fully for Noah in this episode and made to feel guilty for a backstage kiss that may or may not have been in the interests of rehearsing. In some ways, "Uprising" replicates the presence of Shakespeare in programs such as *Gossip Girl* and *Gilmore Girls*, in that *Romeo and Juliet* represents a fantasy (in this case, of erotic union) that Daphne can never achieve.

The show departs from this model, however, in several crucial ways. The production of *Romeo and Juliet* is in fact the least of Daphne's concerns, as the school board is threatening to close Carlton and send its students to hearing schools. Much of the episode is devoted to conversations between the deaf students in which they recount with horror their time in mainstream classrooms, describing that time as a "hell" during which they were teased and tormented by hearing students. Melody, the Carlton guidance counselor, agrees that the school board simply does not understand why an all-deaf school is important to these students: "Until hearing people walk a day in our

shoes," she says, "they will never understand." After rehearsals for *Romeo and Juliet*, Daphne and her friends are inspired by Melody's participation in a major protest at Gallaudet University in 1988 that resulted in a deaf president. They decide to "Occupy Carlton": their plan is to take over a school building until the board reconsiders the decision to close the school. To frame this protest in the most vivid terms, the students agree to use the play as a way of drawing parents, school board members, and the media to Carlton; when the play is done, they will walk out and initiate their occupation. Instead of serving as an obstacle to academic success — as it is in *Gilmore Girls* and *Gossip Girl* — the study and performance of Shakespeare is presented as a means by which Daphne is able to raise her visibility, assert her opinion, and demand access to educational opportunities.

"Uprising" represents another major departure from usual tropes of teen girl TV: apart from a brief scene at the beginning and one sentence spoken out loud at the very end, the entire episode is in ASL. It is the first (and, at present, the only) episode of *Switched at Birth* entirely in ASL and requires a brief disclaimer before the episode begins, in which viewers are told there is nothing wrong with their TV. Thus Melody's suggestion that hearing people "walk a day in [the deaf community's] shoes" resonates with viewers reading these words in subtitles, since we hear no dialogue and only ambient noise for long and complex scenes. During the play, we see Daphne and Noah *signing* the "balcony scene" from *Romeo and Juliet*, with Shakespeare's lines presented in subtitles at the bottom of the screen. The juxtaposition of Shakespearean text with ASL establishes a space in which the girls' identities are not fixed or determined by class, ethnicity, or ability — the dual-language, intermedial performance embodies the intersection of identity categories in the girls' lived experiences.

The result is an example of Shakespeare on teen TV that is ultimately empowering for girl characters like Bay and Daphne. This works in three ways. First, the coexistence of "authoritative" Shakespearean text and its translation into another language underscores the primacy of Daphne's self-expression. She does not speak during the balcony scene, of course, but as she signs her lines, the program visually subordinates Shakespeare's words to her performance. *Switched at Birth* does not alter Shakespeare's language — a move always lamented as the hallmark of a "dumbed-down" adaptation for the teen market — but it does force the viewer to consider his language from a different perspective: that of a particular teenage girl who cannot hear.

The second way this episode represents access to real power within girl culture is in the way the theatrical performance invites us to revise our popular understanding of *Romeo and Juliet* as a play about young people in love. As I have argued elsewhere, representations of Shakespeare within a twentieth and twenty-first century teen milieu not only offer an opportunity for the target market to recognize Shakespearean elements in a contemporary setting (i.e., to identify Daphne and

Noah as "star-crossed lovers," like *Romeo and Juliet*) but also to re-cognize (that is, to *know again*) the play invoked by the contemporary narrative (Balizet 2004, 123). Carlton's *Romeo and Juliet* never take their lives; to assist in starting the protest, Bay pulls a fire alarm that interrupts the play in act two, sending parents, reporters, and school board members streaming onto the school lawn to witness the students' takeover of a school building. At the end of Shakespeare's play, the efficacy of parental, clerical, and political authority is revealed to be critically vulnerable by the confrontation of all these groups with the newly dead bodies of their children — Montague, Capulet, and even the Prince, "for winking at" their feud, "[h]ave lost a brace of kinsmen" (*Romeo and Juliet*, 5.3.295). Carlton's version of the play concludes with similar authority figures confronting the lengths to which their children will go to preserve the one place in which they feel safe and able to thrive. The "Occupy Carlton" protest rejects Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as a love story and in turn re-cognizes the play as the breakdown of one generation's control over another. Since the overwhelming popularity of *Romeo and Juliet* in the high school English classroom suggests at least some association between the lead characters and the contemporary teenagers who study them, *Switched at Birth*'s production is refreshing in its swerve away from an interpretation of girls as self-destructive towards a depiction of girls as politically and socially active.

Finally, the presence of Shakespeare in "Uprising" signals a unique affirmation of contemporary girl culture. The idea of "Shakespeare" does not represent an impossible test, antagonistic teacher, erotic surrender, or physical subjugation; indeed, "Shakespeare" is not used against Daphne or Bay at all. It is Daphne's idea to time the students' occupation with the play, ensuring that adults in attendance will be thoroughly impressed just before they are surprised by the protest; in this way, Daphne exploits Shakespeare's cultural authority in her role as Juliet to exercise political power. Daphne and her friends resolve to fight for their school not only so that they can stay together, but also to resist being forced into deaf "ghettos" in mainstream schools. By occupying a Carlton building, these students insist upon the priority of their educational needs, and by employing Shakespeare in their protest, they leverage his cultural authority into increased visibility from the school board and throughout the hearing and deaf communities. When a snag in the plan requires Bay to think quickly, she stops the play with a fire alarm, asserting her own control over "Shakespeare" while assisting her friends in their plan. Instead of a means of subjugation, in this program Shakespeare's cultural authority is used as a tool against marginalization.

Conclusion

If I have devoted a disproportionate amount of space to *Switched at Birth*, it is because this program does not replicate the pattern of girls' subordination vis-à-vis Shakespeare repeated

in *My So-Called Life*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *Gossip Girl*. Given their many similarities, however, I want to make a few specific claims about the presence of Shakespeare in all five programs and, indeed, television that depicts and is aimed at girls in general. The employment of Shakespeare to frame — and thereby legitimize as worthy of attention — the academic misfortunes or low self-esteem of teenage girls may indeed exemplify a cultural "tactic", as de Certeau defines it:

[a tactic] must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse . . . In short, a tactic is an art of the weak. (de Certeau 1984, 37)

But story arcs like "Self-Esteem" from *My So-Called Life* and "You've Got Yale!" from *Gossip Girl* are as much expressions of Shakespeare's strategic power over a cultural domain as they are examples of tactical resistance to that power. As we see in most Shakespeare plots on TV, girls are usually — though not *always* — portrayed as invisible, physically and sexually vulnerable, less intelligent, and fundamentally less capable as a result of their interaction with Shakespeare. The presence of Shakespeare signals a profound crisis in girls' lives, *not* an opportunity to reclaim or re-appropriate cultural power in their interests. *Switched at Birth* is the exception that proves the rule, but the show rescinds some of the power granted to Daphne in "Uprising," as the next episode (which returns to the usual format of mostly spoken English dialogue with some scenes in ASL) reveals that the school board has decided to keep Carlton open but increase the hearing population to fifty percent. Daphne and her friends receive this news as a pyrrhic victory; although they will not be split up, the admittance of so many hearing students amounts to a return to their nightmarish past experiences in mainstream classrooms.

Thus, if *Switched at Birth* represents an example of Shakespeare on teen girl TV that empowers rather than imperils young women, we must not view it as an outlier but rather one end of a spectrum. Consider, for example, the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*, which is not targeted at teens or girls but, given its setting in a women's prison, features a predominantly female cast more diverse (in terms of ethnicity, race, sexuality, and ability) than anything on the American television networks. In one episode, a group of teenage girls are brought to the prison as part of a "scared straight" program, and several inmates are asked by the guards to participate. Implicit in the request is that the inmates must perform more frightening versions of themselves to convey the severity of prison to their at-risk visitors. One inmate, nicknamed "Crazy Eyes," initially laments the fact that she had expected to play a "real" role, "like Ophelia, or Desdemona,

or Clair Huxtable." When the girls are brought in, Crazy Eyes lunges at one young girl, reciting with relish several lines from *Coriolanus*:

You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate
As reek o'th' rotten fens, whose loves I prize
As the dead carcasses of unburied men
That do corrupt my air. (*Coriolanus*, 3.3.124-7)

What is Shakespeare's purpose here? For Crazy Eyes, his words provide the opportunity for artistic expression — the chance to play a "real" role. For the girl on the receiving end of the monologue, however, these lines are meant to frighten and intimidate her into correcting wayward behavior. The intersection of Shakespeare and girl culture thus presents many possibilities; *Orange is the New Black* cleverly parodies the pervasive motif of Shakespeare as a girl's enemy, but most commonly, contemporary television programs adopt the trenchant position that Shakespeare can and must be used to enforce gendered subordination, sexual and physical vulnerability, and academic inferiority within girl culture. This tradition, I propose, is no more inherent to Shakespeare than girls such as Blair Waldorf or Buffy Summers are representative of contemporary girlhood. Given the popularity of Shakespearean plots in television, film, and new media aimed at *girls*, furthermore, we must acknowledge that Shakespeare's enduring cultural capital is at least partly preserved by girl culture. For scholars invested in the historical and social place of girls and girlhood, then, Shakespeare plays an essential role in articulating the power relationships that define representations of and opportunities for young women. For Shakespeare scholars, too, girlhood must be acknowledged as a powerful shaping force in Shakespeare's enduring cultural authority to this day.

Notes

1. See also Sanders 2006, 45-62, *passim*.
2. Such comparisons were at least partly inspired, no doubt, by the fact that lead actor Kevin Spacey had recently completed a run as Richard III at the Old Vic shortly before the series was released.
3. Friedman (2004) takes a slightly different view, and reads the finale of *10 Things* as the heroine's rejection of the limitations of second-wave feminism and embrace of a more liberating third-wave feminism.
4. According to Lanier, "So deep is that association [between Shakespeare and 'high culture'] that the experience of Shakespeare is for many an exercise in subjection to the taste and values of a dominant educated elite" (Lanier 2002, 52).

5. Angela was played by a young Claire Danes, who would go on to play Juliet in Baz Luhrmann's film. The connection between these two roles and its importance to teen girls is explored in great detail in Kean 2006.
6. Shakespeare provides several opportunities for self-expression to this character. In a later season, the billionaire Chuck takes on a new identity when he wakes from a coma. Spotting Shakespeare's Henry V in the room, he tells the woman who has nursed him back to health that his name is "Henry Prince," and then lives happily with her under this name for several months.

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