Serial Shakespeare: The Case of *Star-Crossed* (2014)

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When compared to the cinema, television has often been described as the most democratic medium, indeed, «the only really 'national' theatre», as Terence Hawkes refers to it (in Banks – Holderness 1998: 176), but for the same easy access it provides to the masses, it has also come in for even harsher criticism as the lowest branch of that low-brow field («the most degraded of the mass media», Terris 2008: 201). The history of moving images and live broadcasts has been characterised by a constantly changing power struggle between dominant and neglected, superior and inferior media forms, but in the twenty-first century, for a variety of technological and sociological reasons, television again seems to be having the upper hand over the cinema, and the shift of audiences away from the cinema in the direction of the television has also been followed by technical and material changes as well. More than a decade ago, John T. Caldwell already claimed that both in terms of «marketing/release and domesticity/consumption […] theatrical film exhibition serves mostly as an ancillary part of the content of conglomerate electronic media» (2005: 92).

Still, it would be a mistake to attempt to discuss television as a uniform format, and in what follows, my focus is on the way Shakespeare's work is appropriated by one particular, but specifically televisual genre: the television series. I use the word 'appropriation' here, although I am fully aware of the highly contested nature of the term and the lack of a generally accepted definition in secondary literature, similarly to the even broader range of meanings associated

with the concept of 'adaptation'. Some scholars attempt to make clear distinctions between the two (e.g. Sanders 2006), but Margaret Jane Kidnie in her extremely useful overview of recent adaptation literature points out how all such clear-cut definitions rely on the questionable assumption «that there exists a relatively stable distinction between work and adaptation» (Kidnie 2009: 4). At the same time, the word 'appropriation' «With its connotations of aggressive seizure and forced possession […] can convey political, cultural, and […] ethical advocacy» (Huang – Rivlin 2014: 2), which makes it particularly suitable for this discussion.

In this age when serialised television narratives dominate the mass media, it is instructive to look at the ways Shakespeare is or is not accommodated into this environment. As a result of what Olwen Terris describes as «the present dearth of Shakespearian drama on British television» (Terris 2008: 211), it is a rather small number of products that needs to be reviewed under the title of "serial Shakespeare". Interestingly, this seems to be the case not only in Britain but internationally: examining the Shakespeare-related television productions of the last couple of years, in spite of the two anniversaries celebrated worldwide in 2014 and 2016, it is possible to find mostly documentaries, educational films, some theatrical recordings or live broadcasts, several repeats of earlier programmes, but hardly any new work ("An International Database of Shakespeare"). Even within this small field, after a brief overview of the various types these works can be classified into, I will focus on a single series to present my arguments. My point is that, while we can find examples of Shakespearean drama turned into serial narratives in a variety of ways, it appears that the only successful pattern – with the possible exception of some historical series – is the one where the original unit of the Shakespearean play becomes one episode in a longer series, rather than the format where a group of characters or a basic diegetic situation is repeated over a series of episodes, opening up the source work into a potentially endless narrative. As an example of such a serial failure, I tackle the case of *Star-Crossed*, a 2014 series made for the CW Television Network, which manifests all traits that would make it contemporary,

televisual, topical and trendy, but which still fails to maintain the tension that characterised the original drama.

As a starting point, it is necessary to remind that even though our historical perspective (together with editorial and publishing traditions since the First Folio) emphasises the interconnectedness and organic development of the Shakespeare canon, the nature of early modern theatre did not favour serialised dramatic production, particularly not in the form of serial performances. Stuart Hampton-Reeves argues that even in the case of the groups of history plays we tend to refer to as tetralogies or cycles, early modern performance was not sequential and plays were neither written nor performed in cycles, until the late nineteenth century, when during the German tercentenary celebrations «Shakespeare's history plays were first played together in the sequence suggested by Heminges and Condell» (Hampton-Reeves 2002: 232). By the twentieth century, however, the critical interpretation and theatrical presentation of the history plays in/as cycles has become the norm, and therefore television broadcasting, characterised by a regularity of programming, recognised the opportunity offered by these histories, which seemed to provide ready-made serial content. What is interesting is that already these early attempts display a consciousness of the television as a medium and the restrictions imposed by its favoured format, and as a result, even the earliest series went beyond placing individual productions next to each other as episodes, having the courage to cut them into shorter pieces. Such alterations in turn diminished the influence of, if not altogether eliminated, the traditional dramatic structure of the plays, replacing it with longer constructs of an episodic nature. The 1960s saw the creation of several televised series: the BBC's *An Age of Kings*, directed by Michael Hayes in 1960, which presented the two tetralogies in a series of fifteen episodes of 60–90 minutes each, followed by *The Wars of the Roses*, a stage and subsequent television adaptation of the first tetralogy into a trilogy in 1965, which was then reedited into eleven episodes in 1966, directed by Robert Midgley and Michael Hayes. In 1963, three Roman plays (*Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*) were also adapted into a series of nine episodes by the BBC

under the title *The Spread of the Eagle*, directed by Peter Dews, with considerably less success than the two above mentioned historical series.

This type of courageous reediting, however, seems to have been replaced later by a different intention, displaying a more reverent attitude toward the original textual unity of the plays, and the well-known 1978–1985 BBC Television Shakespeare series already presented each play as an independent production. Nonetheless, even here the history plays were broadcast with initial flashbacks, to remind audiences of the historical connections within the cycle, and thus create a stronger sense of sequentiality, reinforcing serial cohesion among the plays. A similar strategy characterises the recent BBC series entitled *The Hollow Crown*, the first four episodes of which (based on the second tetralogy) were presented as part of the London Cultural Olympiad in 2012. The second series, subtitled *The Wars of the Roses*, was broadcast in May 2016 as part of the BBC Shakespeare festival to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the playwright's death. Another interesting type of serialisation is represented by the 2005 BBC *ShakespeaRe-Told* series, which joins four individual dramas, none of them history plays, with no original connection among their plots: by virtue of presenting them in a similar format, and with the help of several conscious production decisions, a sense of serial cohesion is created, binding them into a loosely connected unit of four episodes.

My concern here is, nonetheless, a different type of television series, a format that characterises contemporary television: the longer serial structures, traditionally referred to as "serials" (but the two terms often appear to be interchangeable). They can be described as «*ongoing* narratives. This leads to a number of formal characteristics, such as a lack of definitive closure, the occurrence of cliff-hangers, and a tendency towards minimal exposition» (Allrath – Gymnich – Surkamp 2005: 3). This in turn distinguishes the longer, fragmented structures from the standalone units placed next to each other, as e.g. in the BBC Shakespeare series, where each and every episode has final closure. The first and probably most popular of these open narratives was the Canadian metadramatic series entitled *Slings and Arrows*,

which centred around a theatrical troupe and their preparations for the (fictional) New Burbage Theatre Festival. The show successfully survived three seasons between 2003 and 2006, each presenting the rehearsal and performance of a tragedy in six episodes (respectively *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*). At the same time, I believe that this short seasonal structure is not the fully open narrative that is characteristic of the multi-season series dominating television today.

The open narrative type, related to sitcoms and soap operas more than to the traditional BBC miniseries of literary adaptations, is exemplified by two American productions, both targeting a teenage audience, and neither successful enough to earn a renewal for a second season. The years 2009–10 saw a serialised sit-com adaptation of the popular teen comedy *10 Things I Hate about You* (directed by Gil Junger in 1999), while in 2014 a new fantasy/sci-fi series adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* was produced for the CW Television Network under the title *Star-Crossed*. The series was creator Meredith Averill. What I wish to investigate with the help of the latter production is how Shakespeare's *oeuvre*, with its reputation for a universal adaptability that embraces all media and contexts, finds its way into the above described open serial structure, adopting the most popular televisual genre of our time. Beside examining authorship, elements of genre and style, casting politics and other creative choices that resulted from the appropriation of Shakespearean source material into a contemporary format, I will argue that the fragmentation of the original narrative fits into the contemporary cultural tendencies of textual poaching, which encourages adaptors to snatch quotations and (re)place them in seemingly random contexts, often displaying a complete ignorance of original meanings.

Star-Crossed (TV series, CW, 2014)

As opposed to the serialised *10 Things I Hate about You*, *Star-Crossed* had no single feature as a cinematic forerunner to rely on or to imitate, but used textual references to identify *Romeo and Juliet* as its source text, as it will be discussed in more detail below. Both of these

series attempted to cater for young audiences, brought up on a staple diet of endless TV series, but neither attempt survived long; *10 Things* was cancelled after twenty episodes, while *Star-Crossed* only lived to see the end of its first season, with thirteen episodes altogether, as a result of its low ratings. The question may arise whether this failure has anything to do with the adapted script or the new environment, the method and style of the new adaptation or the raw material itself. Does the nine days' wonder suggest that Shakespeare's characters need their settings and plots as well to be able to survive in the jungle of today's networks/cables/channels? Does this failure have anything to do with the ideally unbroken arch of dramatic structure that is so nicely illustrated by Freytag's pyramid? I do not claim to possess the answer to any of these questions, but I think it is instructive to see what purposes Shakespeare and his characters are made to serve on contemporary American television.

When approaching the series from the perspective of authorship, *Star-Crossed* displays the typical attitude to collaborative work seen in television, particularly in television series: as John Hartley claims, «Television was from the start a team sport» (2004: 401). In the case of *Star-Crossed*, Meredith Averill is credited as the show's creator, but apart from her, the production team seems to have changed constantly, the 13 episodes written by 7 scriptwriters (the first two episodes by Averill, then seven episodes by others, and the last four episodes co-written by two scriptwriters each, including Averill), and altogether 11 directors, only two of whom had two episodes to direct, the rest had one each. This is perfectly in line with the way Hartley describes television production:

> In television, authorial originality of imagination or expression, or of research and information gathering, or of a shaping artistic vision, emerged as much from direction as from scripting, from producers as much as from performers, and more from the corporate resources of giant organizations (Fox, Viacom, BBC) than from individual creative genius (which nevertheless was

> both valued and necessary throughout the whole enterprise). (Hartley 2004: 401)

It is hard not to think of Foucault's "author function" (Foucault 1984: 107 ff.) when we realise that for legal purposes, all rights are probably retained by the television channel that ordered the production; authorship as such can therefore be described as «diffused among many individuals and may more properly have been claimed by a studio, company, or channel than by a person, as creative intellectual property increasingly was» (Hartley 2004: 401). When the actual textual work is not acknowledged in either a legal, proprietorial sense, or in terms of reputation, it can easily result in a fragmented and diminished sense of authorial responsibility, and while the series may benefit from a more intensive period of team work, it is inevitable that the overall sense of direction and continuity that either single-author narratives, or *auteur* films display can easily be lost among a larger group of individuals, working side by side, rather than one after another.

Genre-wise, the IMDb classifies the series as romance and sci-fi, and what is even more telling, under the heading "People who liked this also liked…" the titles listed include *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–) and its spin-off *The Originals* (2013–), both on CW, *Revolution* (2012–14), *Primeval: New World* (2012–13), *The Beauty and The Beast* (2012–2016, also on CW), *Bitten* (2014–2016), *Witches* (2013–2014), *The Tomorrow People* (2013–2014), *The Secret Circle* (2011–2012), and *The Nine Lives of Chloe King* (2011), a selection of series dealing with magic, various forms of the supernatural, and elements of crime. At the same time, the labels of *Star-Crossed* could also include the genre of fantasy, as the series mixes elements of reality, or at least of a world we know, with those of a world that we do not know, and consequently fear, contrasting and comparing them to each other, to see how humans interact in such situations. Needless to say, the series discovers that there are more similarities than differences between the two races – both groups have evil and misled characters, just like truly human/humane, and caring and intelligent ones who are not afraid to

take responsibility for their lives, even sacrificing themselves for greater causes.

Besides the cinematic elements of fantasy and science fiction, a topical element that cannot be dismissed is the presence of threat and terror, a contemporary staple of many dystopian American films made after 9/11. Many of these films, such as *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, or *The Maze Runner* series were based on young adult bestsellers, addressing the same demographic as *Star-Crossed*, and even though by 2016 the box-office successes seem to be running out (see Child 2016), the past couple of years have definitely been defined by an abundance of post-apocalyptic young adult fiction and film. According to Melissa Ames, «these YA dystopias […] present fictional fear-based scenarios that align with contemporary cultural concerns» (2013: 4), and she argues that it is «the post-9/11 climate that has instilled and perpetuated a climate of fear» (*ibid*.: 8) which adolescents are a part of today, and which they are therefore eager to consume in the form of popular cultural products, if only to use «the safe confines of fiction to wrestle with» (*ibid*.: 3) their anxieties. These anxieties include not only global terrorism and racism, but even more the abuses of surveillance and technology in general, together with consumerism and economic imbalance, social networking and celebrity culture, health issues and environmental damage caused by the greed and ignorance of humanity – most of which surface in some form or another in *Star-Crossed* as well. In the series, set in 2024, the commemoration of Arrival day – the day when the Atrian spaceship crashlanded on Earth, a day as much feared as celebrated –, is used as a vehicle to express the need for the integration of the alien race into American society. At the same time, any such attempt is shown to be an ultimate failure, since what we can witness throughout the series is an apparently unbridgeable gap between the two groups, humans and Atrians. The irony of the situation is of course that while both groups experience threat, both of them are aware that their presence is seen as a potential colonising attempt and military intervention into the life of the other. The crashed spaceship constantly looming in the background is reminiscent of the 9/11 Ground Zero memorials, the visual presence of the destruction

seen at once as threatening and necessary to remember, in an effort to burn the image into the cultural memory of future generations.

Besides science fiction, fantasy and dystopia, there is another genre that comes to mind when we look at the various choices the series' protagonists make, and it is in light of this genre that the work can find its proper place in the socio-cultural context of its creation. Based on John G. Cawelti's system, it is the genre of melodrama, which is based on the fantasy that the world operates according to our heart's desire, and therefore even if the world appears to be a place of evil, with the proper sacrifice, we may be able to make it good again. In this sense, «Melodramatic suffering and violence are means of testing and ultimately demonstrating the 'rightness' of the world order.» (Cawelti 1976: 46) The proximity of these melodramatic narratives to romance is easy to see, but it is the denouements of the plots that contain the telltale signs: if a loving couple (and the viewers with them) discover that love is victorious above all, whatever the obstacles and the consequences, then it is the moral fantasy of romance that the work endorses. When, however, love is sacrificed in the name of saving the world, humanity, the earth, society, and generally doing the right thing – as it regularly happens in *Star-Crossed* – then it is the melodramatic mode that has become victorious.

The topicality and popularity of this genre can easily be seen if we observe some of the most popular young adult novels and films in the past few years, including *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, both of which operate on the belief that personal love, however truly and deeply felt, is always secondary to one's duty and responsibility towards humanity. In fact, this worldview appears to be so much dominant that journalist Noreena Hertz named a whole generation of 13-20-year-old teenagers Generation K (i.e. Generation Katniss, after *Hunger Games*' Katniss Everdeen). In her view,

> They are a group for whom there are disturbing echoes of the dystopian landscape Katniss encounters in *The Hunger Games*'s District 12. Unequal, violent, hard. They are concerned about

> existential threats. Sadly, their anxieties stretch way beyond the typical teenage anxieties. (Hertz 2015: 46)

The anxieties these young people feel (worry about terrorism, the future, poverty, climate change) are clearly present in *Star-Crossed* to make it a typical product of/for this generation – but these worries (which in the end succeed in keeping apart Roman and Emery, the Romeo and Juliet characters) also turn these dystopian Generation K films melodramatic, rather than romantic.

Further narrative elements the series employs include the staple settings and situations of teen series (high school life, central sources of conflict caused by overprotective or embarrassingly conservative parents, choice of outfits and partners for house parties and the homecoming carnival, substance abuse, relationships with issues of responsibility, sexuality, unplanned pregnancy, to name but a few). Besides, the television news format is also given a central role, as events are regularly shown through the mediated setting of the TV screen, and we are often shown how darkly things appear through the distorted mirror of the media, particularly when its presenters are motivated by greed and self-advancement rather than a service to any community. This centrality of the media is significant in creating another link to 9/11; to quote Marc Redfield, «As a hypermediated event, September 11 makes legible modern society's formidably ambivalent relationship to the representational technologies that saturate it» (2007: 57). It is no wonder, therefore, that similarly to contemporary young adult fiction and films, *Star-Crossed* also problematizes the mediated memories of the traumatic event that has defined its world.

A few references to the thriller-action genre are also noticeable, as the Atrian protagonist, Roman, is forced to investigate dark issues, constantly struggling to make sense of events and conspiracies spun both in his own community and that of the humans. His personal quest to find out the truth about his father and to fulfil his own destiny as a new leader of the Atrians is interwoven with the large-scale search for

the reason of the Atrians' presence and their intentions among humanity.

Aesthetically it is also significant that the series chooses a rather tame and cautious manner in which the alien tribe is represented, recalling the political and ethical aspects of appropriations mentioned above: Shakespeare here is clearly appropriated with a subtle political agenda. The aliens in *Star-Crossed* are rather attractive humanoids, not recognisable by their skin colour but marked by tattoo-like skin patterns, a feature that would be fashionable, or possibly exotic, but not at all alienating today (somewhat resembling the style of the 2011 fantasy film *Beastly*, or the group markings in *Divergent*, or even the saffron markings that Indian women wear at weddings, a globally familiar sight nowadays). Such an aesthetically pleasing Othering process seems at first sight a safer (and less politically loaded) choice rather than a mark of racial distinctions, which used to dominate *Romeo and Juliet* stories ever since *West Side Story*. At the same time, this tattoo-aesthetics fits into the contemporary young adult narrative discourse in which «novels like *Divergent* echo patterns of racial and ethnic inequity while divorcing them from any direct discussion of these issues» (Roszak 2016: 62).

The rest of the differences between Atrians and humans are invisible (the aliens have two hearts and two sets of lungs each), and also nearly metaphorical – Roman's life is saved by his second heart when he is shot by a human soldier, and his heart is also regularly broken by (mostly female) humans, therefore he clearly needs the backup system. In the same way, the two sets of lungs neither give them more breathing space, nor protect them from allergic reactions, and Sophia, Roman's sister, by far the most likeable, if somewhat naïve Atrian, nearly dies from an anaphylactic shock – in fact, these features, rather than giving them advantages, make them all the more vulnerable and dissolve the sense of threat that ignorance would imbue them with.

In terms of casting, however, the series *Star-Crossed* clearly plays the minority card, almost didactically referring to the fact that it is not only the aliens who are treated as unequal members of society but also

African-American, Asian-American and other groups whose skin colour or facial features mark them out as Others among the white Anglo-Saxon majority. The – proportionately nearly insignificant – group of coloured humans includes a single African-American student, Lukas (played by Titus Makin Jr) and one adult, the head of the Edendale integration program, Gloria (played by Victoria Gabrielle Platt); there is another student, Julia, played by Malese Jow, whose part-Chinese, part-Cherokee Indian descent makes her qualify as someone discriminated in this racist dystopian society. The rather uncharacteristic whiteness of the rest of this idealised public school (called Edendale) on the one hand disregards contemporary American ethnic proportions: the series is set in Louisiana, where according to the 2010 census, 32% of the population consists of African-Americans ("2010 Census Data"). On the other hand, it implies an elitist attitude which allows minorities to access quality education only through a limited number of patronising integration programmes. Among the Atrians, white and coloured characters display behaviour patterns that correspond to the most deep-set stereotypes of racism. Throughout the series, racial conflict is openly used to underpin the constant feeling of menace that the situation represents for both sides. Were it not for the fact that the series was produced in 2014 in the USA, some images and situations of conflict could easily give the impression that *Star-Crossed* represents a cautious conservative attitude towards the current migration crisis in Europe. Being an American production, it clearly shows a consciousness of the increasing tension caused by the presence of Spanish-speaking immigrants on the continent, since for all the apparent mixing of colours, each character with any evil traits is marked as Hispanic by his/her skin colour and facial features. In the series, these characters intend not only to ask for refuge but to colonise and take over the Earth, subjugate humanity and then wipe it out altogether. Their extremist groups uphold the ideals of racial purity (the extremist human groups show similar attitudes, although with considerably less cunning), they do not shy away from deceit and crime, and the threat of their ability to mingle within civilised humanity – spies even among the group of children – confirm the

somewhat paranoid conviction that whoever comes and shows marked physical differences is an enemy. Reinforcing these stereotypes is the fact that all positive Atrian heroes are white, and Roman, the protagonist (played by Matt Lanter), is charming and handsome in an innocent-looking way that simply cannot hide any evil.

Towards the end of the season, racism is upgraded with the worst forms of religious extremism (the word "abomination" is used by both sides, for the same purist concept of denouncing mixed-race sex and children – a concept rather close to the Biblical sense of the word, where it refers to some inherently evil and loathsome sin). Added to that, there is political corruption witnessed everywhere, supported by authorities abusing their power (the police and other military groups selling their services to the highest bidder), topped with the threat of alien invasion, end-of-the-world scenarios, all brightened by the possibility of finding a cure-all for every known disease of humankind.

While the qualities listed above may not seem particularly associated with serial narratives, it is undeniable that the broader context of the television as broadcast medium has left its mark on this modified *Romeo and Juliet*, arguably one of the most universal stories in the history of mankind. The topicality of form and content, familiarity of style and aesthetics are all present – and yet, none of these features were sufficient to help the series survive its first season. Having looked at the traces the adapting context of the television and contemporary cinema left on the series, it is therefore equally essential to see what happens to the Shakespearean text in this adaptation. The Shakespearean elements are apparently subtle but in reality easy to recognise and digest: textually, the title of the series and each of the episodes are taken from *Romeo and Juliet*, although it is clear from the episode titles that the development of the narrative is not meant to follow that of the Shakespearean play. The main title, taken from the "Prologue", is a phrase that immediately invokes its absent nominal element: 'lovers', and however wide the phrase's currency in high and popular culture, referring to all kinds of couples, ranging from the mythological Pyramus and Thisbe to Buffy Summers and Angel from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, it still inevitably recalls the tragic romance of

Romeo and Juliet. Indeed, the phrase has become so popular by the twenty-first century (IMDb lists altogether 67 titles of films and TV episodes under this title) that it is used in almost any context, even where it is hard to find any possible connection to a Shakespearean or archetypical conflict in which a doomed love affair tries to blossom against all odds.

The CW series, however, reinforces its choice of title by making the quotation a thematic focus (the lovers coming from different stars) and a systematic reference: all episodes' titles can be found in *Romeo and Juliet*, although neither their order, nor their actual contexts seem to offer deep metaphorical or symbolical connections between the source text and the television episodes. The quotations are taken from the following loci, in this order[1]: «Star-crossed» (Prologue 6); «These violent delights have violent ends» (2.6.9); «Our toil shall strive to mend» (Prologue 14); «And left no friendly drop» (5.3.163); «Dreamers often lie» (1.4.51); «Stabbed with a white wench's black eye» (2.4.13-14); «To seek a foe» (1.1.78); «An old accustom'd feast» (1.2.20); «Some consequence yet hanging in the stars» (1.4.107); «What storm is this that blows so contrary» (3.2.64); «Give me a torch» (1.4.11); «This trick may chance to scathe you» (1.5.83); «Passion lends them power» (2 Prologue 13). Confronting the quotations with their original and new contexts makes it clear that the original Shakespearean setting does not play any significant role in the choice of episode titles: for instance, the phrase "our toil" is not self-referential here, since it does not suggest any effort on the part of the filmmaking team (as it refers to the actors in Shakespeare's Prologue), but to the characters' efforts to deal with a diegetic conflict. All in all, the quotations are used rather for the most superficial similarities in the plot, precisely in the manner that Douglas Lanier describes as "textual poaching" (after Michel de Certeau), and defines in this way: «popular culture fastens on Shakespearian passages immediately relevant or useful to its purposes without great

[1] All quotations refer to the following edition: William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Arden Shakespeare Second series, Ed. Brian Gibbons, Walton-on-Thames, Thomas Nelson, 1997.

regard for fidelity or authenticity» (Lanier 2002: 52). *Star-Crossed* fits this bill perfectly: while the use of Shakespearean phrases as episode titles functions as acknowledgment of the source and the series' reliance on it, the way they are employed (in bite-size chunks, taken nearly randomly out of context) signals a lack of interest or desire to engage in textual interpretation. The creators of the series regard *Romeo and Juliet* as no more than a plot and a few characters that can be freely transposed into new contexts, without consideration for the original frame of references that are inevitably lost in this transfer. In this light, it is particularly telling in comparison that the series *10 Things I Hate about You* uses no Shakespearean titles for its episodes, but titles of popular songs, some of which have been used in the 1999 feature film and in the series as well, thematising the development of the relationships between the young protagonists[2].

The use of quotations for the episode titles in *Star-Crossed* is somewhat uncommon and therefore remarkable in one respect: films targeting a teenage audience usually take great pains not to mention any canonical or classical authorial origins, arguably to avoid references to school curricula and possibly memories of classroom boredom, or any sense that the film may have an educational agenda. (Among teen films, typical titles avoid any reference to either Shakespearean or other sources: *She's the Man*, *O*, *Never Been Kissed*, *10 Things I Hate about You* being just as plain examples as *Clueless* or *Bridget Jones' Diary* for their hidden Jane Austen references.) At the same time, I believe that the Shakespearean references in the series and episode titles also serve a generic function: they emphasise the best known element of the source text (doomed romance) to help audiences place the series among the diverse generic traces it displays in its desire to appear as relevant and contemporary as possible.

[2] For a complete list of songs and episode titles, consult the Internet Movie Database websites: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0147800/soundtrack; http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1450774/soundtrack.

On the other hand, we would be deluding ourselves if we claimed that the original frame of reference is still recognisable for the majority of audiences, particularly when it comes to teen adaptations. Not even the best known and most iconic phrases, with the possible exception of a few proverbial snatches (mostly "To be or not to be", and "O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo") would probably ring bells with the younger generation of cinemagoers, let alone television viewers. Nonetheless, the use of quotations in the titles still acknowledges Shakespeare as an icon and a household name, although a considerably different one from what he was even half a century ago. This altered consciousness of what constitutes Shakespeare therefore needs examination: it may be worthwhile to ponder on the implications of the altered cultural context in which short quotations, randomly poached snatches of text, fake quotations authenticated with an image and a name find a natural place beside each other. John Drakakis argues that

> This invocation of Shakespeare as a touchstone of education, as well as a perennial source of universal truths, presupposes what Michel Foucault has called, in another context, particular 'relations of meaning', and we would do well to bear in mind the various historical and cultural connections which inhere in such relations. Indeed, the erasure of context from individual quotations, or from those works as a whole that we designate 'literary', is an irreducibly ideological operation which the larger study of culture and its internal structures is concerned to elucidate. (Drakakis 2003: 165)

In many ways I believe this phenomenon of «erasure of context from individual quotations» is similar to the tendency of popular culture to ignore traditional attitudes of reverence for the Shakespearean text, and re-creators' inclination to pick and choose from the *oeuvre* what they prefer, whether that is a plot (often copied/stolen or inherited by Shakespeare himself), a group of characters, or a set of words (as *Star-Crossed* illustrates). At the same

time, these irreverent quotations also align themselves with the Shakespeare cult, and in their own way they are also essential as evidence to prove the survival of Shakespeare as a phenomenon in contemporary popular culture. Therefore the ways Shakespeare is referenced in a variety of adaptations is also instructive in terms of cultural studies, as we may observe how – if at all – the text, the author, or the cult phenomenon that we call Shakespeare remain visible in contemporary culture.

What such snatches of random quotations cannot achieve, however, is coherence – and this is where we must point out the most probable reason for the series' failure to survive until a second season. The series' creators may have believed – rightly – that Romeo and Juliet were sufficiently powerful characters to be easily transplanted into any odd context and carry the plot to eternal fame. What they appear to have forgotten, however, is that Romeo and Juliet's story could easily be degraded into farce (see Pyramus and Thisbe) without the proper dramatic suspense that allows their characters to grow into such superhuman heights – take away the tragic climax, and neither the narrative, nor the young couple's relationship will survive the constant on-and-off romance that a continued serialisation would require. As a consequence of the choice of genre and audience – teenagers – the stakes are not high enough to keep the plot going: we find it hard to believe that twenty-first century teenagers will experience anything more traumatic than a bad breakup, and therefore we can hardly be blamed if we do not wish to wait and see how the couples are rearranged in the next season before the annoyingly contemporary youngsters get on with their lives. But even with a less predictable script and less infuriatingly clichéd characters, the series would have had an uphill task to stay alive, being as it was based on a dramatic original. As John Caughie remarks, the serial narratives of popular television are descendants of the novel, «in particular, […] the multi-character, multi-plot, temporally extended, interrupted narratives of the nineteenth-century serialised novel» (Caughie 2012: 55) – a form that thrives on opening up of its narrative, as opposed to the drama, whose pyramidal structure will simply collapse, burying its

adaptors' hopes under its ruins, as the case of serialised Shakespeare drama (the traditional treasure trove of all scriptwriters) has repeatedly illustrated. Nonetheless, even *Star-Crossed* could prove that Shakespeare's name still carries some cultural currency that aspiring writers are eager to employ in the service of whatever agenda they pursue. At the time of writing, there is word of yet another new series in the making based on *Romeo and Juliet*, under the painfully unoriginal title *Still Star-Crossed* (Goldberg 2016) – who knows, maybe this will be finally the Bard's big break on TV…

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