

HALSEY'S HOPELESS FOUNTAIN KINGDOM

A transmedial reformulation of *Romeo and Juliet*

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Abstract – This paper aims at analysing the transmedial reformulation authored by the singer Halsey in her rendering of a *Romeo and Juliet*'s narrative. After exposing the fundamental principles of transmediality, this study will highlight how Halsey strategically used different media in order to give a more dynamic fruition of her content and augment the audience' immersion in the universe of *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*. The video clips of the songs and their lyrics, which compose the concept album, will be put in comparison with the original Shakespearean play and the aesthetics references to another reformulation of it – namely, Baz Luhrmann's movie *Romeo+Juliet*. The objective of the analysis is to enquire into the reformulation strategies of the original source text, which are meant to rework an existing narrative and generate a new version, with profound differences in the story and in the characters' representation. The analysis will not only highlight the transmedial storytelling techniques; it will also underscore the enduring relevance of transmedia practices in contemporary creative expression.

Keywords: transmediality; transmedial reformulation; multimodal analysis; adaptation; *Romeo and Juliet*

1. Introduction

When we consider *Romeo and Juliet* from the perspective of the transmedial potential of the original storytelling, it is easy to realize that the drama authored by William Shakespeare more than 400 years ago is almost peerless. Countless versions of the play, reformulations and adaptations have been produced, along with picture books, comic books, texts with “translations” of the Shakespearean middle English into modern English, junior novels and entries in popular children's series (Cavanagh 2023), or even video games (Iaia 2018). Overcoming the taboo of altering the Shakespearean source, which is seen as a ‘sacred’ text (Marsden 1995), has led to the creation of reformulations and adaptations of the drama in nearly every imaginable category of contemporary pop culture (Lanier 2002). As for *Romeo and Juliet*, there are several reasons that explain why it continues to captivate young audiences:

1. **Relatable themes:** the play addresses universal themes such as love, rebellion and the search for identity. As Bloom (1998) describes, the play is a representation of the vitality and idealism of youth, emphasizing how the young lovers defy social conventions and familial expectations.
2. **Youthful passion:** the central theme of intense, passionate love appeals to young readers who may be experiencing their own emotions for the first time. The portrayal of Romeo and Juliet's all-consuming love speaks directly to the intensity of youthful passion. And, in this drama, the intensity and transformative power of love, being described as a force that shapes the characters' destinies, is highlighted (Bloom 1998).
3. **Tragic beauty:** the tragic nature of the play adds a layer of complexity and depth. Young readers may be drawn to the beauty within tragedy, finding a certain romanticism in the idea that love can be both powerful and ultimately tragic. As

emphasized by Nevo (1969), in *Romeo and Juliet* the acts orientated to free love seem to be condemning it, bringing an unnecessary doom more definitely than any other action in the play.

This paper aims at analysing one of the outcomes stemming from the transmedial potential (Jenkins 2014) of *Romeo and Juliet*. In particular, this study enquires into the transmedial reformulation of the Shakespearean drama titled *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* (HFK). The latter is the second studio album by American singer Halsey, released on June 2, 2017. HFK is a concept album, meaning that it follows a cohesive narrative or theme throughout its entirety. In this case, a modern Romeo-and-Juliet-inspired story, set in a dystopian world, is presented. In an interview with *iHeart*,¹ Halsey states: “*Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* is a story of two people who want to be in love so badly, they’re willing to change themselves for their love. And in doing so, they let the real versions of themselves die. It’s a *Romeo and Juliet* story”. She adds:

The big thing that led me to making what turned out to be a *Romeo and Juliet* story was, I was in a relationship with someone for a really long time, and I broke up with them, and then I sat down to write this album and realized I didn’t know anything about myself. [...] I realized that I didn’t know how to write about me, I only knew how to write about him. And that was bad. So, it was almost like that strong girl who fought her way out [...] was gone. I had to go back and save her. [...] I had to go find her first and think to myself, when I’m alone and I’m not in a relationship, who am I? [...] And that’s a lot of what this record is about.

Hence, Halsey used the Romeo and Juliet’s famous love story as a reference to narrate her own. She appropriates and reworks an existing classic narrative, which functions as a source text, in order to create a new target version. The author refers to the story of the two lovers from Verona, but at the same time she steps away from the narrative universe to tell a new text, new in plot and style, which better suits her intentions, as well as the taste of her audience. The analysis shall illustrate how Halsey has used two source versions in order to produce her transmedial rendering. One is Shakespeare’s play; the other is an adaptation of the drama: the movie *Romeo+Juliet* directed by Baz Luhrmann in 1996. The result is a performative translation (Canalès 2020), which relies on forms of repetition. At the same time, Halsey’s reformulation is part of a complex transmedia story world and spreads on multiple media platforms.

By pinpointing the reformulation strategies that are adopted by Halsey, this study will reveal to what extent *Romeo and Juliet* has worked as a powerful transmedial resource to construct a new text that is tailored for Halsey’s envisaged audience. Furthermore, the case study will detail that marketing approaches to transmedial reformulations are employed so as to transform the audience into active collaborators. One of the key features of this concept album is, in fact, a peculiar collaboration with her audience. In the before-mentioned interview, she also says:

For this [album], we put a lot of work into setting up the experience. So, mailing kids’ stuff in the mail, like secret messages to their house. Doing scavenger hunts. We have character profiles for all the characters in the storyline so you could watch them interact, and watch them engage as if you’re watching the two protagonists actually participate in the story that’s unraveling.

Halsey employs a strategy that consists in using different platforms to distribute the content in a more efficient way, developing a more fluid conversation with the public (García-Avilés 2012). In so doing, she adopts a strategy which is crucial in the broader

¹ Mastrogiannis 2017 (online).

context of transmediality – namely, the change of media perception and media consumption habits. This is expected to transform passive and isolated consumers into social players, who are interested in interaction and sharing. These new consumers desire to participate in the story and social media platforms enable them to shape media content, thus creating a deep, overreaching, and participative relationship between author and audience (Gürel, Tiğli 2014).

The following section will illustrate the main aspects of transmediality and the use of social media sites that is adopted by Halsey. Then, the selected corpus of examined music videos will be introduced. After the analysis, conclusions will be drawn as to whether Halsey's work can be considered a transmedial reformulation of the fictional universe of *Romeo and Juliet*. It should function as a target version that involves more semiotic resources and communication channels to deliver the re-interpretation of the source text (Iaia 2018).

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Transmedial reformulation and adaptation

Before enquiring into Halsey's concept album *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*, it is pivotal to understand the main differences between the notions of "adaptation" and "transmedial reformulation". We shall begin by introducing the concept of "intertextuality", according to which all creation is social creation, and all production is always reproduction. Any pieces of writing and types of cultural production represent an interweaving of already-existing cultural material (Fishlin, Fortier 2000). As Barthes (1981) writes, "Any text is an intertext; other texts are present in it". The intersection of different texts is a "larger mosaic of cultural practices and their expression" (Orr 2003). By sharing this point of view, Jacques Derrida (1985) emphasizes the notion of "iterability" or "recontextualization", asserting that texts in history are inevitably subject to this process. According to Derrida, every instance of writing, imbued with meaning and driven by human intention, transcends its original context, becoming open to an infinite array of new contexts. Consequently, the significance of the written word is bound to undergo continual transformation, diverging from its initial interpretation. Even when we endeavour to remain faithful to the original intent, the act of recontextualization inherently involves reinterpretation and modification. From this perspective, adaptations, as well as reformulations, generate an extended intertextual engagement with the original works, thus becoming the results of interpretative and creative acts (Hutcheon 2006) helping the source texts to survive by accommodating different historic-cultural and media systems (Straumann 2015).

Adaptations can occur within the same medium or as a result of an intermedial exchange process. Yet, as is analysed by Canalès (2020), in recent academic conversations around transmedia and participatory culture, "adaptation" has been seen as an activity coinciding with mere transfer of texts. Accordingly, it does not usually transform or tamper with the plot or narrative structures of the source versions to any significant degree (Dusi 2015). Furthermore, it has been observed that transmedia storytelling, along with convergence culture more broadly, presents challenges for Translation Studies. It seems that Adaptation Studies, Translation Studies, and Transmedia Studies operate as separate entities that occasionally use similar terms to discuss related topics, whereas they tend to demonstrate little mutual interest. Marais (2019) calls for the need to improve these categorisations, hence Canalès (2020) suggests seeing transmedia story worlds through the

lens of translation and adaptation. In fact, Transmedia Studies consider text reformulations and recreations as multimodal instances of “performative translations”. These translations give rise to “infinite texts” that evolve organically, with no fixed beginning or end (Canalès 2020). While interlingual translation and book-to-film adaptation remain predominant areas of study, there is a growing interest in transmedia phenomena, and transmedia narratives defy conventional categorization, prompting scholars to adopt a transtextual perspective. Viewing translation, adaptation, and transmedia as part of a complex transtextual system rather than opposing or rigidly categorizing them reveals their potential for transformation. Embracing this perspective can enhance our understanding of contemporary narratives and their dynamic relationship with audiences as active participants.

Even though adaptation studies and transmedial studies share different aspects, there are some elements that help us find a difference between an adaptation and a transmedial reformulation. We can consider the movie *Romeo+Juliet* directed by Baz Luhrmann in 1996. It is defined as an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (Dubois 2024; Oza 2024; Rustad 2024). The intertextual link with the Shakespearean tragedy is evident already by the title of the movie. As concerns the audiovisual adaptation, there are aspects which have been reimagined, such as the visual non-verbal signs – the modern costumes and guns, the photography and the American setting of *Verona Beach*. On the other hand, other crucial elements, like the audio verbal signs – namely, the lines uttered and the development of the plot – are equivalent to the lines of the tragedy. Although the writers performed a substantial recontextualization and renovation of the events of the source text, when we watch the movie, we understand without any doubt that we are watching a *Romeo and Juliet* story. That is because a crucial issue regarding Shakespearean adaptations is fidelity (Oza 2024). Fidelity refers to the degree by which an adaptation remains faithful to the original text, capturing its themes, characters, and plot. All these aspects, in fact, are not changed or modified in Baz Luhrmann’ movie, but contribute to our identification of this target version as directly linked to its source.

Instead, transmedial reformulations are less constrained by the notion of fidelity. The elements of the original plot can undergo radical changes affecting the visual representation of multimedia, the structure of source versions, the development of their stories. We can say that the intertextual link between the target text and its source texts is less evident. In addition, by being transmedial, the essential components of a fictional narrative are strategically distributed across various delivery channels, aiming to craft a cohesive and coordinated entertainment experience. “Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story” (Jenkins 2007). This process encompasses the introduction of modifications to the original narrative, stylistic elements and presentation formats. Essentially, transmedial storytelling entails the reconfiguration of a given narrative or conceptual framework, manifesting across an array of media platforms. Moreover, transmediality is also characterized by the tendency to co-creation. In fact, Jenkins (2006) exposes the three primary characteristics for designating a project as transmedia: (1) to spread across multiple media platforms; (2) to add understanding to the narrative universe; and (3) to require involvement from fans. Moreover, each story is independent and self-contained.

The music album under discussion can be considered an appropriate transmedial rendering, since all the above strategies can be identified. Familiarity with either the textual or cinematic iterations of *Romeo and Juliet*’s story is not a prerequisite for the comprehension of the narrative universe of *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*. Nevertheless, basic knowledge of Shakespeare’s classic can augment one’s discernment of the thematic

elements, such as forbidden love, betrayal, and tragedy, interwoven into the storytelling fabric of *HFk*. At the same time, exposure to Baz Luhrmann's film adaptation can expedite one's recognition of visual and stylistic allusions within the album, enhancing the viewers' overall interpretive experience. In fact, the correlation between *Romeo+Juliet* and the thematic underpinnings of Halsey's concept album finds a heightened expression in the respective music videos of the album's songs.

Halsey's concept album takes place in Anorev (i.e., "Verona", the Italian city where the original drama is set, whose name is spelled backwards) and the protagonists are the bisexual female character Luna Aurum and the male character Solis Angelus. Halsey explains in a post on X² that the male character, Solis, stands for the sun and plays the role of Juliet. In this case Halsey, in the representation of her Juliet, follows the semantic pattern that Shakespeare used to describe Juliet seen by Romeo, who says: "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? / It is the east, and Juliet is the sun." (II.ii.). The original male character Romeo is interpreted by Halsey and is called Luna, a female reformulation of Romeo, which means "moon" in Italian. In the before-mentioned post on X, she explains that "the moon is often portrayed as a sapphic woman". In contemporary usage, *sapphic* refers to femmes attracted to other femmes whether they identify as lesbian, bisexual, queer, trans, masc, or any diverse identity falling within the spectrum of same-sex attractions (Doan, Garrity 2006). The name Luna is not casual, since it generates more than just the semantic contraposition of moon and sun. The sapphic's allusion brings in an essential theme in the narrative of Halsey's concept album: sexuality, and sexual orientation. It shall be proved in the analysis how Romeo's romantic love for Juliet will be significantly different from Luna's modern love for Solis. The transmedial strategies of storytelling adopted by Halsey are dealt with in the following section.

2.2. Halsey's transmedial storytelling

Since "artists from a variety of genres rely heavily upon current technologies and social media platforms to develop elaborate promotional strategies" of concept albums (Burns 2016), habitual promotional tools (such as teasers, album trailer, meet&greet events) and several innovative actions were taken in order to sponsor *HFk*, which used new social media sites to boost the hype among the fan community. On February 16, 2017, the X account "[@houseofangelus](https://twitter.com/houseofangelus)"³ was created. On March 7, three other accounts followed: "[@lunaaureum](https://twitter.com/lunaaureum)",⁴ "[@houseofaureum](https://twitter.com/houseofaureum)"⁵ and "[@solisangelus](https://twitter.com/solisangelus)".⁶ This is an example of *world building*, which is defined by Jenkins (2009a) as closely linked to the principles of "immersion" and "extractability". They serve as ways for consumers to engage more directly with the worlds represented in the narratives, treating them as real spaces which intersect in some way with our own lived realities. Other principles of transmedia adopted by Halsey are "subjectivity" and "immersion". The former is evident by the fact that the artist is giving shape to different perspectives of characters through this transmedial extension; the latter is pursued by giving her fans a chance to follow the characters and immerse themselves in the world. Fans are also urged to share the content through the social media site X, thus calling upon "spreadability" – namely, "the capacity of the public to engage actively in the circulation of media content through social networks and in the process expand its economic value and

² <https://twitter.com/halsey/status/1009530836251656192>.

³ <https://twitter.com/houseofangelus>.

⁴ <https://twitter.com/lunaaureum>.

⁵ <https://twitter.com/houseofaureum>.

⁶ <https://twitter.com/solisangelus>.

cultural worth” (Jenkins 2009b). Spreadability is also reflected by an alternative media extension that is exploited by Halsey to delve into the artistic narrative and engage her audience by including *Romeo and Juliet*. The author creates some letters addressing fans. These handwritten pieces of texts represent a personalized mode of communication, where Halsey utilises the “extractability” principle, another feature of “transmediality”, serving the integration of fictional narrative into the daily lives of fans. Furthermore, the inclusion, in the letters, of quotes from *Romeo and Juliet* establishes the thematic groundwork for the narrative, highlighting an intertextual connection with Shakespeare’s text. This holds significance as “the extramusical content of the concept album is vital to the production of meaning” (Burns 2016).

The last example to describe how extensively and innovatively Halsey has used the various online platforms and online community regards the album cover. When her fans asked her about the album cover, she answered that she would have made them find it.⁷ Halsey organised a worldwide scavenger hunt hosted on March 31st, 2017. In nine cities across the world, she hid small gun-shaped USB sticks containing information about the album. New York’s USB was at Central Park’s Romeo and Juliet statue, and others were found at The Shakespeare Bridge in Los Angeles and Mexico City’s Parroquia del Purísimo Corazón de María, where Baz Luhrmann filmed *Romeo+Juliet* with Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes. In cities lacking a public Shakespeare reference, USBs were hidden at local fountains.⁸

The scavenger hunt offered the fans a site of active participation, relating to the “collective intelligence” principle, which is defined as “this ability of virtual communities to leverage the combined expertise of their members. What we cannot know or do on our own, we may now be able to do collectively” (Jenkins 2006). It would have been impossible for a single fan to travel around the world in order to find every USB sticks. Yet, by means of co-operation with the online community, this objective has been achieved. Individuals applied their unique skills, in this case also their physical position in the world, and knowledge collectively to fulfil common goals and objectives. This echoes a fundamental feature of collective intelligence described by Levy (1997): “No one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity”.

In an age of collective intelligence, transmedia storytelling represents the optimal aesthetic form. Halsey adopted transmedial strategies to broaden the understanding of a fictional world by disseminating information, ensuring that no individual consumer possesses comprehensive knowledge. This encouraged recipients to engage in discussions about her concept album, adopting the roles of hunters and gatherers as they navigate diverse narratives to piece together a cohesive understanding from scattered information. The result is a method of collaboration between the author and her receivers, which is effectively positioned within the modern dynamics of content enjoyment, thus satisfying the palates of the new type of audience that has come to form. An audience formed by active people, who want to play a role as co-creators of the content, who want to feel immersed within the narrative universe, who need a virtual space to share their contribution.

⁷ <https://twitter.com/halsey/status/839267340298530816>.

⁸ Lakshmin 2017 (online).

3. The examined music videos

The videos of the songs from the concept album *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* represent the case study. Music videos are a powerful resource for any musician (Aufderheide 1986); in fact, they can be the key to a musical group's success. Nowadays, the examined media preserve their connotation as a pivotal element in the marketing plan of any release. Videos have great impact on the release of a single, of the promotional life of the songs or of the whole album, and they are announced on social media with stills, teasers and trailers. In the (post)digital age, music videos have developed their intertextual traits, allowing the artists to articulate the narrative of their works in different ways. Besides, the new digital trends have made fan participatory activities more accessible and commonplace (Edmond 2014). As concerns the concept album at issue, love, hatred and fight are the most important themes of the transmedial narration. Hence, they will be the main objects of the upcoming analysis investigating the connections with and reformulation of the sources – Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and *Romeo+Juliet* authored by Baz Luhrmann. The videos of the following songs will be examined:

1. *The Prologue*
2. *Alone*
3. *Now or Never*
4. *Sorry*
5. *Bad at Love*
6. *Strangers*

The aim is to assess whether Halsey's work can be labelled as another example of the transmedial reformulations of the famous drama.

4. Analysis

4.1. The reformulation of the Shakespearean prologue

The analysis shall begin from the prologue. It is an introductory scene, which addresses the audience in a monologue intended to reveal the antecedent, that is, to introduce the stage action before its actual beginning. In *Romeo and Juliet*'s prologue the most important themes which will develop in the following "two hours' traffic" of the drama are presented: the two households, the ancient grudge, the civil blood and the death that will bury the parents' strife. Halsey intertextual reference to *Romeo and Juliet* and its prologue is evident in the earlier moments of *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*.⁹ The album's prologue, divided into two parts, occupies the top position on the track listing. In the first part, Halsey reads the famous verses of *Romeo and Juliet*'s prologue:

Two households, both alike in dignity / (In fair Verona, where we lay our scene), / From ancient grudge break to new mutiny, / Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean. / From forth the fatal loins of these two foes / A pair of star-crossed lovers. take their life / Whose misadventured piteous overthrows / Do with their death bury their parents' strife / The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love / And the continuance of their parents' rage / Which, but their children's end, nought could remove / Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage; / The which if you with patient ears attend / What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.

⁹ Halsey 2017b (online).

A second part follows, where Halsey sings the following verses and repeats them twice: “I am a child of a / Money hungry, prideful country / Grass is green and it’s always sunny / Hands so bloody, tastes like honey / I’m finding it hard to leave“. Halsey’s rendition is preceded by the authentic Shakespearean prologue, thus making explicit reference to the traditional themes, including the conflict between two households, civil strife, and the emergence of love from animosity. Then, Halsey introduces her own adapted themes within the dystopian context, emphasizing societal values focused on wealth and pride. While the latter can be associated with the rivalry akin to that of the Capulets and Montagues, the contemporary element of monetary contention emerges as a distinctly modern source of antagonism. Moreover, the mention to the bright weather is a clear allusion to one of the main characters of the concept album: Solis Angelus, who belongs to the rival household of Angelus and will be one of Luna’s lovers throughout the story of the album. Conversely, the hands marked with blood evoke the impending feud set to unfold in the streets of Anorev. The honeyed taste of the speaker’s hands serves as a symbolic nod to the lineage of the other central character, Luna Aureum. Her household’s herald portrays a bee in contraposition to the Angelus’ household, whose symbol is a sword with angel’s wings (see Figure 1 and Figure 2 below).



Figure 1
Aureum’s household.



Figure 2
Angelus’s household.

Significantly, Halsey tweeted about bees before the album release, the letters sent to fans were stamped with a bee, and there are several allusions to bees in her videos (Viñuela 2020). The ancient rivalry between the two households is not explained here, nor any external characters apart from the couple will play a relevant role in stirring the rivalry. Yet, hatred is present, along with violent scenes of fight, blood and people dying. Halsey’s *Prologue* plays the same role of the Shakespearean lines, as what we watch, while we listen to Halsey reading the source text’ prologue and then singing her own lines, is a collection of clips taken from all the other videos, working in this way as a ruinous premonition of what is going to happen, just as the lines of the drama do.

4.2. The rendering of the ball scene

Halsey confirmed that another source of inspiration was Baz Luhrmann’s movie *Romeo+Juliet*.¹⁰ This is also evident from the aesthetic similarities between the film and the music videos.

By way of example, let us consider the video of *Alone*.¹¹ The masked ball scene is profoundly inspired by Baz Luhrmann’ set design, so Halsey’s dress is inspired by the

¹⁰ There is even an interview between Halsey and Baz Luhrmann, set in a gothic church, where they discuss about the characters, the influences and the collaborations they had in order to create their works. The interview is available at: Apple Music (2017), *Halsey: Baz Luhrmann, Religion and ‘hopeless fountain kingdom’ Interview*, May 4, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWnqfDd7Pj4&t=506s>.

chainmail shirt worn by Romeo in Baz Luhrmann's movie and also Juliet's angelic outfit reminds viewers of the film in a more explicit way (Figure 3 and Figure 4).



Figure 3
Halsey's *Romeo and Juliet*.



Figure 4
Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Even though the outfit is strongly inspired by Luhrmann's work, the narration is a personal reformulation of both sources. The ball scene, in fact, is not a moment where two strangers see each other for the first time and fall in love reciprocally. Instead, there is a moment where Luna sees that Solis is accepting the invitation of another woman, thus being left "alone", as the title of the song suggests. It is not a uniting moment, but a separating one and on the level of narration, the ballroom is the lascivious context where their love is tested. The lyrics of the song stresses the difficulty for Luna to love and to be loved:

You know that everywhere I go / I got a million different people tryna kick it / But I'm still alone in my mind / I know you're dying to meet me / But I can just tell you this / Baby, as soon as you meet me / You'll wish that you never did.

¹¹ Halsey 2018a (online).

So, in the examined reformulation, the masked ball becomes a nightclub, a free and hedonistic space for pleasure and enjoyment; a space meant to allure through its human-nonhuman technologies of public intimacy (Demant 2013). The concept of love is not the one of love at first sight. It is a love that must face all the inconveniences of the present time, and as such it is far from being eternal; loyalty is hard to maintain and mistakes are made and eventually, these mistakes will make love fade away.

4.3. “Don’t trust the moon, she is always changing”. Luna Aureum’s variable sexual orientation

The quote of this sub-section comes from Luna Aureum’s bio in her X account¹² and serves to highlight Luna’s incapability to love, which is also the central theme of *Bad at Love*.¹³ The pivotal problematic of her love is her polyamorous attitude towards her partners, and her longing for sexual freedom ends up hurting the people she loves and, eventually, herself too. The lyrics show Luna’s attitude towards different partners. Her list of lovers includes both men and women alluding to her bisexuality, which is a running theme throughout the album. With any of her partner she cannot maintain a stable relationship:

Got a boy back home in Michigan / And it tastes like Jack when I’m kissing him / [...] There’s a guy that lives in a garden state / And he told me that we make it ‘til we graduate / [...] Got a girl with California eyes / And I thought that she could really be the one this time / [...] London girl with an attitude / We never told no one but we look so cute / Both got way better things to do.

This is not the Romeo we are used to know, the one loving her woman desperately and above anything, even above his own life. Luna follows her own instinct, which changes nature and form constantly, as she also admits in the song: “But you can’t blame me for tryin’ / you know I’d be lyin’ sayin’ / you were the one / that could finally fix me / Lookin’ at my history / I’m bad at love”. In light of this, an interesting link can be built between Luna and what Juliet answers to Romeo’s love promises: “O, swear not by the moon, the inconstant moon, / That monthly changes in her circled orb, / Lest that thy love prove likewise variable” (act II, scene II, Lines 109-112). Juliet’s utterance about the moon’s changing nature reminds viewers of Luna’s inconstant and, above all, variable love. Luna appears to be the personification of what Juliet was afraid Romeo would be, and her outfit continues to echoes the one of Luhrmann’s Romeo. Halsey said in an interview with Billboard:¹⁴ “Every time I hear the song or play the song, I see Leo [DiCaprio] in his Hawaiian t-shirt riding down the highway jumping around the backseat with his friends”. In her words, the song should “sound like Leonardo DiCaprio in a Hawaiian T-shirt in a droptop yellow convertible car, driving down the highway like in *Miami Vice* with all his friends”. The image is actually reproduced at the end of the song’s video, when Luna follows the same patterns as Romeo in *Romeo+Juliet*.

4.4. The notion of fight in the examined works

Another important theme of the Shakespearean play is represented by the notion of fight. Fight, in *Romeo and Juliet*, is the consequence of the pressures that masculinity exerts on the male characters of the drama (Appelbaum 1997). Both Gregory and Sampson find

¹² <https://twitter.com/lunaureum>.

¹³ Halsey 2017a (online).

¹⁴ Billboard 2017 (online).

themselves called upon to initiate an incident of masculine aggression and the obligation to attain to the realization of a normative value. Moreover, the regime of masculinity demands that its unsatisfiable goals must be followed to the end, and people such as Sampson and Gregory, but also Tybalt and Mercutio, are compelled to try to complete themselves in ways that can only result in their death. Romeo and Juliet instead, due to their love, are the conceptualisation of the desire to escape from the regime that Appelbaum (1997) defines as the “prosthetics of masculinity”.

Since Halsey's transmedial reformulation is also a reformulation of values, she is again profoundly inspired by the violence of Baz Luhrmann's work. Halsey recreates gun fights similar to the ones present in the cinematic reformulation of Shakespeare's play. The setting of *Romeo+Juliet*, *Verona beach*, is “explicitly millennial”, as the pop-culture world of drugs and gang violence threatening and the “sensation-crazed, trigger-happy populace are kept in check only by police helicopters and riot squads” (Loehlin 2000). While it has been argued that *Romeo+Juliet* “employs violence in this film not to glorify or sensationalize the behaviour but to address issues of the Western world at the turn of the century” (Rowland 2023), Halsey seems to use the dizzying postmodern world of *Verona Beach* because of her obsession with the movie. She has never explained in her interviews the reason of the guns in her concept album. Since she followed Baz Luhrmann's representation when characterising the protagonists and Anorev, it can be assumed that it would have been incoherent if people dressed in modern clothes and drove cars while using swords as weapons. Furthermore, the fights of the two households can be seen as the resistances that society exerts on people who share different sexual values, such as bisexuality and polyamory.

In Luna's struggle to find freedom, another important fight is represented in *Strangers*,¹⁵ a song focusing on the relation between Luna and Rosa. Halsey decides to reformulate the love of Romeo for Rosaline, which is less famous than the one for Juliet. At the beginning of the Shakespearean drama, we know that Romeo is depressed because of his love for another woman of the Capulet family, Rosaline. Romeo's affair with Rosaline seems to be connected with the tradition of courtly love, and he expresses his emotion in the trappings and conceits of that code. When he meets Juliet, though, the bright sun of her beauty dispells his “vapourings” about love, and he plunges into a passion that shakes his very soul (Cole 1939). The love for Rosaline is coherent to the society's values, whereas the love for Juliet is the force that will drive Romeo out of the prosthetics of masculinity, in order to find freedom. In Halsey's reformulation, the polarization towards masculinity is inverted. The love between Luna and Rosa is placed at the opposite extreme of this polarization. It is a love between two women, representing the femininity *par excellence* and Luna's sapphic characterisation, as wanted by the author.

In an interview for the *Zach Sang Show*,¹⁶ Halsey says that in *Strangers* she openly uses for the first time female pronouns. In the song Lauren Jauregui, another bisexual singer, plays as Rosa in the music clip and she also shares the same innovative view of the song. In the course of an interview with *ELLE.com*¹⁷ Lauren stresses the importance of giving a piece of music where LGBTQ+ communities can easily identify with, without reading the subtext of mainstream films, television characters, and songs to find themselves.

In the transmedial reformulations, artists adopt classics' narratives while providing something new and related to contemporary social and political issues and values. From this perspective, Halsey innovative homosexual reformulation aligns with current concerns

¹⁵ Halsey 2018b (online).

¹⁶ Zach Sang Show 2017 (online).

¹⁷ Bendix 2017 (online).

and topic of the most recent society, connecting with her fans but also generating debate. Halsey used a different language and contributed to the construction of a transmedia environment, where several and new type of audiences can express their participation in an emergent pattern in a socio-narrative space. It could be the first time that LGBTQ+ communities feel represented by a transmedial reformulation of the narrative universe of the love story between Romeo and Rosaline.

In Halsey's transmedial rendering of this story in the song *Strangers*, Luna and Rosa – former lovers who are now “strangers”, as the title of the song suggests – are dressed like boxers, as is visible in Figure 5.



Figure 5
Luna (Romeo) and Rosa (Rosaline).

The fight between Luna and Rosa is also a fight between Halsey's homosexuality and bisexuality, the latter prevailing as she encounters Solis, and this relationship ends up being another one where Luna is unable to maintain a long-lasting relationship with her partners. It is meant to prove again that Luna's mood is variable and inconstant as the one of the moon, mirroring Juliet's description of the satellite in the Shakespearean drama.

4.5. “These violent delights have violent ends”. The concept album's bitter end

The last song under analysis is *Sorry*. Both the song and the video were recorded in one take.¹⁸ In a post on her X account,¹⁹ Halsey explains that *Sorry* is about her past relationships which ended because of her insecurity and fears. In the lyrics, very similar patterns to other songs of the album can be found, thus outlining a certain consistency in the way Luna handles her relationships, a way that becomes a representation of the singer's way of being. The line: “I can change my mind each day” is another reference to her lunatic behaviour. “I've missed your calls for months it seems / Don't realize how mean I can be”, from *Sorry*, is similar to “Said he tried to phone me, but I never have time / He said that I never listen, but I don't even try”, from *Alone*, but also to “She doesn't call me on the phone anymore / She's never listening, she says it's innocent”, from *Strangers*.

The video depicts the singer-songwriter navigating a dystopian wasteland, her face smeared with blood, while singing about a previous relationship. The inclusion of this dystopian setting enhances the visual storytelling and complements the song's exploration of emotional complexities and regret in the context of a past relationship. A floral shirt worn by Luhrmann's Romeo in the last scenes of the movie is also worn by Luna in the last song *Sorry*, thus creating a connection between the two works. It is also worth

¹⁸ <https://twitter.com/halsey/status/959452637094666240>.

¹⁹ <https://twitter.com/halsey/status/870791368238522368>.

mentioning that in the concluding song of Halsey's *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* the consequences of the fights between the two households can be easily spotted everywhere on the streets. Rubbles, damaged auto, even a corpse surrounds Luna in her last moment of her narrative reformulation. She did not die because of bad timing or misunderstandings like in *Romeo and Juliet*, even though these could not but split Luna and Solis apart.

In the case study, the story has been reformulated. As a result, the two lovers' enemy is no one but Luna herself. She is the one that, among the rubble, admits: "I run away when things are good / [...] My ignorance has struck again / [...] Didn't mean to leave you / [...] Someone will love you / But someone isn't me". Indeed, a bitter end, as the one of the drama's lovers, but the audience reach the finale in a complete reformulated, unprecedented way. The target text generated from the original Shakespearean play maintains its tragic conclusion, both in pictures, music and lyrics, but all the processes and the events which collimate in a melancholy close are the ones to which different people, sexualities, morals can relate, reflecting upon its narrative about self-reflection, personal growth, and the longing for forgiveness.

5. Conclusions

This article examined five music videos and a prologue of the concept album *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* by Halsey. The case study is presented as one of the transmedial reformulations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

As was illustrated above, Halsey's concept album reformulates the most important themes of the Shakespearean play, while modifying specific textual features of the famous drama and reflecting some audiovisual features of the movie *Romeo+Juliet* directed by Baz Luhrmann in 1996. It applies the principles of transmedial storytelling such as spreadability, immersion and subjectivity (Jenkins 2009a, 2009b). At first, it unfolds its narrative across different media channels, thus requiring an active participation from the audience. In addition, even though *HFK* adopts invariant cores of *Romeo and Juliet*'s story as lines of resistance (Eco 2000), innovative aspects are found in the reformulation.

These innovative aspects are what determine the main difference between an adaptation and a transmedial reformulation. Even though adaptations can also add modifications and recontextualizations to the source text, the lines of resistance are here stronger and the author's freedom is diminished compared to the possibilities of narrative flows (Eco 2000) permeating the production of transmedial reformulations. As we have analysed, the innovative aspects of *HFK* are more radical and, at first sight, it seems that the concept album has little to do with the Shakespearean tragedy. Yet, the examined retextualization preserves some lines of resistance that, in Halsey's view, are used as invariant cores of her version of a *Romeo and Juliet*' story. In particular, the prologue is reproduced as a teaser trailer, maintaining the syntagmatic and functional role of introducing the main themes and background information in order to enhance the audience's understanding and engagement with the text. At the same time, Shakespeare's lines are partially reinterpreted by Halsey, who searches for a renewed type of engagement of the target audience. This is visible in the ball scene, where we witness equivalence in the situational function of the famous scene, serving as a catalyst for the events that drive the narrative forward and establishing the central themes of love, conflict, and fate. However, divergence from the source version is identified when Luna reflects on her troubled history in love affairs, as well as when she sees Solis being kissed by another woman. These types of modification find a climax in the reformulation of Romeo's love towards Rosaline. In *HFK*, this is exploited by the singer in order to express her

bisexuality, since Luna was in love with another woman, Rosa. A bisexual Romeo that is unprecedented; in fact, *HFK* is labelled as a queer version of the play (Viñuela 2020). Hence, what emerges is a renewed text which broadens the transmedia potential of source versions. In the examined rendering of *Romeo and Juliet*, the new scenarios are meant to expand the ways of interpreting the original text and to add new inferential pathways to the original narrative universe.

Finally, since the current development in media production, combined with marketing logic, is characterized by two major trends, transmediality and participation (Eder 2014), and due to the fact that digital technologies are catalysts for transmedial phenomena (Gabriel *et al.* 2015), further explorations of transmedial reformulations of *Romeo and Juliet* – but also of other works – will contribute to the improvement of the definition of storytelling and audience engagement in contemporary media landscapes.

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