

# The "Shakesteen" genre: Claire Danes's Star-Body, Teen Female Fans, and the Pluralization of Authorship

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## Abstract

Deploying a broadly cultural studies (and multidisciplinary) approach, this paper focuses on the emergence of what I term the "Shakesteen" genre. It considers this genre as performing a powerful and under-researched role in shaping adolescent gender and sexual identities. I focus specifically on the star-body of Claire Danes and the role that first catapulted her to stardom — that of Juliet in Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*. I argue that Danes's body offers her teen female following an alternative, private, unregulated site through which to access Shakespeare, his text and the character of Juliet. Through star/fan relations, which ultimately exceed the constraints of the filmic narrative, the teen female fan is able to experiment with different models of femininity and appropriate some of Shakespeare's cultural power for her own political means.

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## Introduction

The economic and cultural practice of producing films that target a specific youth audience is not particularly new, and while this trend began as early as 1955, the 1990s and early 2000s marked an "explosion" of teenpics (Doherty 1998, Dixon 1990, and Neale 1999).<sup>1</sup> The 1990s and early 2000s witnessed, as well, a flood of films adapted from Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies, including Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996b); Gil Junger's *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999); Tim Blake Nelson's *O* (2001); and Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000). Over the past decade, largely due to a continuing interest in cultural studies, the teenpic genre has emerged as one warranting serious analysis. Timothy Shary, who offers one of the most recent, in-depth contributions to this field, seeks to "demonstrate not only that youth films comprise a legitimate genre worthy of study on their own terms, but that they are imbued with unique cultural significance: they question our evolving identities from youth to adulthood while simultaneously shaping and maintaining those identities" (Shary 2002, 11). In his study, Shary categorizes the teenpic into sub-genres, but does not include Shakespearean teen films as a genre and mentions

Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996b) — the cult film that captivated an international teen audience and the first example of what I am calling the "Shakesteen" genre — only once. Responding to this oversight, I understand Luhrmann's film as kick-starting its own sub-genre of Shakespearean adaptations, marketed at a specifically teen audience, and investigate the ways in which this film, imbued with the cultural authority of "Shakespeare," resonates with female teen viewers and perhaps helps them to shape their adolescent identities. Rather than conceive of this engagement as one that is located wholly within the filmic narrative, I am interested in how a rhetorically constructed relationship between the teen female star (in this case Claire Danes as Juliet) and her fans (through fan practices) has the capacity to supersede the constraints of the filmic text. I argue that the relationship of mutually dialectical exchange produced through star/fan relations elicits alternative representations of femininity that circulate within contemporary teen culture.

### The "Teening" of Shakespeare: The Appropriation of *Romeo and Juliet* as Cult Teen Text

First performed in approximately 1595 and published as a tragedy in the 1623 folio, *Romeo and Juliet* is Shakespeare's only play centered around a young "pair of star cross'd lovers" (Prologue, line 6); Juliet has not yet turned fourteen and Romeo is a little older.<sup>2</sup> Within twentieth century popular cinema, furthermore, the play has become increasingly imbricated in modern discourses of white, middle-class teen identity, which in turn has enabled an expansive "teening" of Shakespearean material in the late twentieth century. This appropriation of Romeo and Juliet as examples of "middle class" youth, despite their fictional status in Shakespeare's Verona, has a cinematic history that begins with George Cukor's 1936 adaptation, which featured adult actors playing the parts of Romeo and Juliet, and moves onward to Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 popularization and Baz Luhrmann's 1996 postmodern extravaganza.

Lawrence Levine asserts that "culture is a process, not a fixed condition; it is the product of unremitting interaction between the past and present" (Levine 1993, 154). In thinking about culture as a constant process of negotiation and renegotiation, Levine provides an insight into the role filmic adaptations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* that have played in American culture throughout the mid-to-late twentieth century. While George Cukor and Renato Castellani's film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* may contribute to what Levine has described as the metamorphosis of Shakespeare from entertainment for "everyday" American people to the cultural elite, Zeffirelli's, and later Luhrmann's, cinematic appropriations suggest that in the latter half of the twentieth

century Shakespeare was being appropriated for yet another audience, the contemporary American teenager.

Cukor's lavish two-million-dollar *Romeo and Juliet* (1936) spiralled downward at the box-office, and led one British film critic to conclude that "the cinema is not yet at ease with Shakespeare; it approaches him with a sense of occasion, not venturing to make a friend of him but determined to do him proud" (cited in Rothwell 1999). Despite (and perhaps explaining) its lack of widespread commercial success, Cukor's cinematic exercise in bardolatry appealed directly to an elite, white, educated, middle- to upper-class audience and contributed to the mobilization of Shakespeare as an American signifier of high culture.

At almost the same time, however, George Marshall's musical *Goldwyn Follies* (1938) displaced Cukor's use of Shakespeare as signifier of American high culture and middle-to-upper class moral values through its re-worked inclusion of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* at the hands of teenage "bobbysoxer" Hazel Dawes. Marshall's film centers on Dawes, the quintessential "everyday" all-American girl that unsuccessful producer Oliver Merlin employs as his "Miss Humanity" consultant. Through her advice, which includes rewriting the film script for *Romeo and Juliet* so that it has a happier ending, Hazel steers Merlin's films towards mainstream commercial success. Marshall's deployment of the female teen who rewrites Shakespeare's canonical text for popular audience consumption positions his film as a counter-text to Cukor's and Castellani's bardolatrous cinematic endeavors. Marshall's creative appropriation of Shakespeare's play through the all-American teen female makes *Goldwyn Follies* a precursor for Luhrmann's film, with its "Bazmark" signature style and empowered representation of the character of Juliet.

Sixteen years later, Renato Castellani shot his *Romeo and Juliet* (1954) in the streets of Italy, becoming the first director to cast actors to approximate Romeo and Juliet's actual ages. Laurence Harvey and Susan Shentall were, respectively, twenty-five and nineteen at the time of production. While Castellani may have broadened 1950s teens' exposure to filmed "Shakespeare" through his casting of young actors, he also heightened the circulation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as a text that could express teen identity — a phenomenon cemented with Franco Zeffirelli's box-office smash, *Romeo and Juliet* (1968).

To a greater extent than Castellani, Zeffirelli was intent on producing a "young people's *Romeo and Juliet*" ("A New Romeo," 55, cited in Rothwell 1999, 134) and he drew on Leonard Bernstein's Broadway musical *West Side Story* (Bernstein, Laurents, and Sondheim 1957) for inspiration.<sup>3</sup> Funded by Paramount Pictures for what Zeffirelli deemed "the derisory sum of \$800,000," his popularization was wildly successful with its targeted middle-class teen audience and grossed an

incredible \$48 million at the box-office (Zeffirelli 1986, 225). Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* was a key contributor to the Hollywood trend that characterized this period — making films about young people, and specifically for the "juve trade" or juvenile spectators — and was also one of the first Shakespearean film adaptations to make "Shakespeare" relevant to, and popular with, American adolescents (Neale 1999, 218).<sup>4</sup>

### The pluralization of authorship in Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*

Thirty-five years on, Luhrmann produced a millennial re-popularization of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* that dominated the box-office on its opening weekend. By casting two up-and-coming teen stars in the lead roles, demonstrating a filmic preoccupation with their sexual awakening, and superimposing a soundtrack that later achieved triple platinum status, Luhrmann borrowed the best of Zeffirelli's approaches to Shakespeare's play, re-working these elements through his signature "Bazmark" style. While reverent teaching approaches had consolidated Shakespeare's canonical status across Anglo-American high schools, Luhrmann's film departed from the tradition of Cukor's and Castellani's "high culture" adaptations. Like Marshall's *Goldwyn Follies*, it celebrated alternative ways in which future directors, educators, and teens could approach "Shakespeare" and his plays.

Luhrmann's adaptation may have achieved immediate mainstream success with the teen audience it courted, but critical accolade was longer in coming. Zeffirelli disdainfully referred to Luhrmann's Shakespearean debut as a "monumental disaster" (Zeffirelli 1986, 45-55). Another critic gleefully described it as a "violent swank-trash music video that may make you feel like reaching for the remote control" (Gleiberman 1996). Courtney Lehmann concisely sums up the visually affronting "Bazmark" signature style as composed of: "signature whip pans, tight on point-of-view shots, and other vertigo inducing angles"; a haphazard amalgamation of Western, gangster, kung-fu, crime-thriller, and action-movie genres; the infusion of gospel into disco musical performances; media allegory, pastiche, and parody (Lehmann 2002, 145). Luhrmann's unique cinematic style angered fidelity critics who felt that he had irrevocably and blasphemously estranged the film from its early modern source. While critics interpreted Luhrmann's acts of authorial appropriation as ranging from playful iconoclasm to egotistical hubris, their critical reception positions Luhrmann's adaptation within a logic of pluralized, and thus problematized, textual ownership.

Through his trademark cinematographic style, Luhrmann was fast establishing himself as an innovative, creative, and celebrity auteur within the domain of contemporary popular culture.

In this context, Luhrmann fractured and fragmented Shakespeare's play not only through his "Bazmark" style, but through the presence of audience members who may have been drawn to the film by his status as its director rather than by preconceived ideas they may have held about Shakespeare. Thus, while Luhrmann's flamboyant cinematic style may have positioned him as an auteur competing with Shakespeare, extra-textual variables, such as the presence of audience members familiar with Luhrmann's directorial style, positioned his film as the authoritative site through which they could access, and make meaning of, the early modern playwright and his play.

### Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* and Teen Female Reception

While *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* may have cemented Luhrmann's status as an innovative director and accorded him a cult following with cinema aficionados obsessed with the "Bazmark" style (Donaldson 2002, 60), the film's extraordinary box office success can be attributed to teen female cinemagoers who flocked to cinemplexes across Anglo-America (Nash and Lahti 1999, 68; Adamek 1997; Schoemer 1998; Verzemnieks 1996).<sup>5</sup> Luhrmann wrote of the instrumental roles that DiCaprio and Danes themselves played in re-working Shakespeare's characters so that they would resonate with the 1990s teen filmgoer: "It's important to make these characters anew for every generation, and Leonardo is particularly suited to this. He does seem to symbolize his generation" (Luhrmann 1996a, Preface). Similarly, Luhrmann cast Danes because of her ability to make contemporary the figure of Juliet. When Luhrmann first met Danes, he was "[r]eally struck by her. Juliet is written as a very smart, active character. *She* decides to get married, *she* resolves to take the sleeping potion, *she* really drives the piece. The extraordinary, unmissable characteristic about Claire is that here is a sixteen year-old with the poise and maturity of a thirty year old" (Luhrmann 1996a, Preface). Luhrmann selected Danes because of her ability to portray Juliet as independent, intelligent, feisty, headstrong, and millennially modern. Danes's previous and subsequent cinematic oeuvre confirms a desire to play strong female characters, and it is easy to understand why late twentieth century female adolescents would be attracted to her star persona and the particular model of femininity that she represents.<sup>6</sup>

Critics, however, have not adequately recognized the centrality of Danes and the audience of female teens to the film. Despite the abundance of critical work published on Luhrmann's film, the +*Juliet* of the film's title — that is, the star-body of its female lead — has generated less critical attention than the body of DiCaprio-as-Romeo. Instead, critics use DiCaprio's status as a female teen pin-up boy to explain the film's commercial success. In their fascinating article on *Titanic* (Cameron 1997) and the attractions of DiCaprio, Melanie Nash and Martti Lahti provide an in-depth account of the multiple ways in which female adolescents engage in fan practices

(ranging from pinup collection to Internet discourse) in order to circumvent the negative aspects, which included his dislike for his teen heartthrob status and his subsequent mistreatment of teen female fans, and enjoy him as a "romantic hero" (Nash and Lahti 1999, 64-89). They cite *Vanity Fair's* report that "countless girls flock around Danes just to touch a hand that touched his," and in affirming DiCaprio's status as the film's main economic attraction, Nash and Lahti (perhaps unintentionally) position Danes's star-body as merely a corporeal medium through which teen female fans are able to access DiCaprio (Nash and Lahti 1999, 69). Through their indirect affirmation of a universal model of cinematic spectatorship that understands identification and object choice as exclusive, Nash and Lahti evade recognition of Danes as an equally viable object of teen identification and desire. While multiple spectatorial desires certainly circulate around DiCaprio-as-Romeo, it is also important to acknowledge that Danes-as-Juliet operates as an equally powerful site of spectatorial identification and desire.

Within the field of Shakespeare and film studies, Barbara Hodgdon's insightful work on the Shakespearean star-body of DiCaprio-as-Romeo advocates a cultural studies approach to understand the implications of teens' engagement with DiCaprio's body for their developing adolescent identities (Hodgdon 1999, 88-98). Hodgdon perceives DiCaprio's androgynous body as morphing into other texts such as *Titanic*, and she argues that through specifically teen female fan discourse, his body operates as a polysexual site for the negotiation of imagined "safe" sexual identity. She contends: "It is precisely because Leo disrupts dominant fictions of masculinity that his transitional, differently eroticized body can be read as exemplary, as providing a safe harbour for sexual awakening" (Hodgdon 1999, 93). While not doubting the validity of these claims or the significance of DiCaprio to teen popularizations of the film, I am preoccupied with the nature of teen female fans' engagement with Danes's star-body and with the possible implications of this exchange for their adolescent identities.

Research on spectator/star relations (let alone work that focuses on the relationship between the teen female star and her teen female fan following) is, however, quite restricted. Jackie Stacey's pioneering contribution to this emerging field offers interesting avenues through which to begin to imagine the types of relationships that teen female fans may hold with Danes (Stacey 1994). In this context, it is worth documenting briefly the motivations underpinning Stacey's study as well as identifying the ways in which certain aspects of her inquiry may be appropriable for my own analysis.

Stacey's work evolves out of contemporary methodological research based on memory, and her historicized account of spectator/star relations is specific to the cultural context of 1940s and 1950s Britain — periods of great cultural change for women in terms of post-World War II roles

in paid employment and consumerism (Stacey 1994). Her inquiry recognizes that existing theories of cinematic identification do not always account for the complexity and diversity of meanings at stake in spectator/star relations. In addressing this perceived elision, Stacey focuses specifically on the female spectator to identify the many ways in which she may respond to, and engage with, the female star.

Stacey elaborates upon Andrew Tudor's sociological framework for star/audience relations and adds a consideration of gender that is absent from his model. She appropriates his distinction between spectator/star relations that take place inside the cinema (which are context specific) and outside the cinema (which are more diffuse). For Stacey, the first categories of female spectatorial identification that occur within the context of the cinema include "devotion," "adoration," and "worship." These forms of identification locate the 1950s Hollywood starlet at the center of these interactions with her female fans and position the spectator as a key contributor to the construction of the star's image and identity. The following group of categories of identification offered by Stacey — which include "transcendence," "aspiration," and "inspiration" — foster a recognition that the relationship between the spectator and the star is more fluid, and allows for the pleasures gained from the spectator's imaginings of taking on the roles and identities of the stars within the cinema (Stacey 1994, 151-158).

Stacey's move outside of the cinema, and her examination of the fragmentation of the boundary between self and ideal through "extra-cinematic identificatory practices," marks her work as highly innovative through its deviation from critical analysis that has traditionally favored an examination of the ways in which stars operate as formal elements of the filmic text. In brief, Stacey defines "pretending," "resembling," "imitation," and "copying" as extra-cinematic practices that may elicit a psychic imaginary or a physical metamorphosis in the female spectator. For example, "pretending" can involve other female spectators in "collective fantasy games" that have the ability to bestow personalized meanings onto stars through activities outside of the cinema and may function (through similarity) to merge self and ideal. On the other hand, "resembling" involves an element of performance, and generates a personal connection to a star; either through name, physical appearance, or personality. This is distinguishable from "imitating," whereby the viewer actually imitates a star or her specific characteristics in a film (this practice also includes a performative element). Conversely, "copying" involves an actual physical transformation — "an intersection of self and other, subject and object" (Stacey 1994, 167).

Significantly, Stacey's work describes spectator/star relations as having the potential to produce models of femininity both within and outside the cinematic viewing experience. Her understanding of this engagement as generating identity-play that exceeds the filmic narrative

through extra-textual fan practices that have the potential to transform the female spectators' psyche or physique is particularly helpful. Importantly, because of its 1950s time frame, preoccupation with the adult female star and inclusion of the retrospective experiences of the now-adult female spectator, Stacey's study (quite rightly) does not consider Internet fan practices, the teen female star-body or the teen female spectator. Examining Internet fan discourse generated in response to Danes's performance in the television series *My So-Called Life* (*MSCL* [1994-5]), I understand Danes's subsequent role in *R+J* as providing her teen female fans with an already politically inscribed cultural text through which they could safely imagine, negotiate, and experiment with different models of feminine identity. In a manner different from Luhrmann, Danes's star-body, and the relationship she holds with her teen female fans, opens up an alternative point of entry into Luhrmann's film and into Shakespeare's play. Danes's fan following and her standing in contemporary popular culture produces a pluralization of authorship that locates Danes as a *auteur* competing with both Luhrmann and Shakespeare.

### Danes's Star-Body as a Generative Site of Meaning

Before her star-turn in Luhrmann's *R+J*, Danes's developing body — in both a professional and corporeal sense — had become a familiar site upon which teen female fans waged battles of female identity. Her role as Angela Chase in the short-lived, but critically acclaimed, ABC television drama series *My So-Called Life* (1994-1995) provided for Danes an emergent and growing teen female fan base that affirmed and consolidated her status as America's "Everyteen." Despite the fact that *MSCL* (produced by Marshall Herskovitz and Edward Zwick, the creators of *thirtysomething* [1987-1991]) was canceled after less than a season, Danes's highly acclaimed performance in the series won her the prestigious Golden Globe Award for "Best Actress in a Television Drama Series." A decade later, the success of *MSCL* is still evident from MTV re-runs of the show, a 2003 DVD release, and countless fans still registering hits on *MSCL*'s unofficial website, <http://www.mscl.com>. Danes's starring role in *MSCL* and her subsequent fan following have significant implications for the ways in which these same fans later interpreted the +*Juliet* of Luhrmann's film adaptation.

Within the field of cultural studies, work on fan/star relations, and the ramifications of this exchange for the issue of identity, is relatively new. Critical 1980s and 1990s interventions into the emergent field of fandom cautioned against the stigmatization of fans and advocated the importance of more academic interventions into fan culture. This strategy worked to affirm (at least in some circles) its status as a valid field of inquiry. Lawrence Grossberg's, and Henry Jenkins's studies have recognized the existence of fan cultures and addressed some of the varying ways in which



these active (generally male) fan subcultures have utilized fan practices for resistant and potentially political purposes (Grossberg 1992; Jenkins 1992). Similarly, and at times responding to the "boy culture" bias of previous interventions into the field, feminist critics such as Angela McRobbie, Catherine Driscoll, Gael Sweeney, and Barbara Ehrenreich have focused on teen girls and fan practices. Collectively, their studies have contributed to the identification of a myriad of ways teen female fans have negotiated their ways around representations of femininity, often appropriating them in self-empowering ways (McRobbie 1991; Driscoll 1999; Sweeney 1994; Ehrenreich 1992). More recently, and marking a shift towards fandom in cyberspace, Nancy Baym has analyzed the ways in which fans create online communities and rich social groups through the sharing of common meanings, practices, and identities (Baym 2000). Taking into account these findings, I focus specifically on the teen female fan discourse that Danes's role as Angela in *MSCL* has generated and conceive of her star-body as a site of female empowerment and resistance.

Danes's depiction of Angela in *MSCL* fostered a strong teen female-fan following. For many female viewers, the personal struggles of this fifteen-year-old sophomore attending Liberty High (and living in Three Rivers, a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) struck a chord. Danes-as-Angela's intimate first-person voice-over, which personalized her transition from childhood to adulthood, granting it narrative and audience primacy, drew in the viewers ("About Angela Chase"). The entries in the online "So-Called Guest Books" (spanning 1-11 guest books) suggest that the vast majority of teen female fans identify most strongly with Angela. For Jasmine, "My favorite char[a]cter would have to be Angela. Pr[oba]bly because cos i'm a teenage girl. . . Sometimes when i'm watching the show I'll be thinking w[ha]t she's thinking out loud and it's scary. I find myself wish[ing] though that I could be a character in that show, that i could be part of Angela and her friends lives for one day" ("Jasmine"). (The show itself thematizes the power of identification when Rayanne's mother tells Angela's mother, with a sense of appreciation, that her daughter would like to "be" Angela. She reminisces about how for young people, there is "this one person" who is "in color" while everyone else is in "black-and-white": "You just want to eat them up," to "live in their bed and just be them.") Another fan liked "how the characters were 3-d," while Alyson declared *MSCL* "my absolute most favourite show because I can really relate to Angela and the way she handles things and the way she thinks." She continued: "Other shows about teenagers are totally fake and pretty much insult us . . . . But 'My So-Called-Life' tells it close to the truth, I was sick of watching shows like 'Saved by the Bell' and 'California Dreams' which make teenage life so perfect." For other fans, Angela was also the character whom they most aspired to resemble. Crys wrote: "I also have a friend like Rayanne and people say I look like Claire Danes," while another revealed: "even after I cut my hair they say I look like Claire." (In the series,

Danes's Angela experiments with her feminine identity through altering her physical appearance. Upon the advice of her new best friend Rayanne, Angela dyes her hair red. She confides to the viewer: "So when Rayanne Graff told me my hair was holding me back, I had to listen. 'Cause she wasn't just talking about my hair. She was talking about my life" (*MSCL* 1994.) These private, yet paradoxically public, fan revelations (of which I have cited only a few) confirm teen viewers' identification with Danes-as-Angela to suggest a communal, yet still individualized, identification with Danes-as-Angela's performance through extra-textual fan practices.

Upon *MSCL*'s "hiatus" and eventual axing, many of Danes's teen female fans moved beyond the television text and into the online world of cyberspace and print media to engage in a grass-roots campaign in an effort to save the show.<sup>7</sup> Fans sent 5,000 letters and up to seventy-five mail messages a day to ABC, posting over 3,600 messages on the ABC section of America Online. A cyberspace fan group known as "Operation Life Support" also published a newsletter and raised thousands of dollars to take out full-page advertisements on behalf on the show in cinema papers such as *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*. One female fan distributed purple ribbons to more than 200 people to show their support for the series (Bornstein 1995; Shaw 1995; Sandberg 1995). Susan Choy, manager of ABC Entertainment's multi-media services, announced: "This is the largest on-line campaign to save a show that I've ever seen. . . . It's also the most vocal and passionate" (Sandberg 1995). These fan practices suggest that Danes's teen female fans were extremely adept at using virtual technology and print media for a political purpose: that is, to "save" representations of femininity with which they identified and that they felt accurately represented who they were, or wanted to be.

In her insightful analysis of Internet discourse by teen female fans in an effort to "save" *MSCL* and Danes's Angela, Susan Murray argues that the cyber community these fans created provided them with a "private/public dream space for a girl's construction of a sense of identity" and "the opportunity for further engagement with both the show and self" (Murray 1999, 221-35). While Murray centers on the Internet as a medium for girl-power and political activism, I wish to re-focus attention back onto Danes's star-body as a crucial site of girl power. Importantly, the Internet fan discourse produced out of fans' engagement with Danes-as-Angela constructs her star-body as a material site that can be, and has been, successfully inscribed with teen female fans' own political agendas. In thinking about Danes's body and fan interaction, Jenkins's original work into fandom, and his argument that fans are "poachers" and active cultural critics who willfully engage in the traversal of high/low culture divides to produce potentially political counter-narratives, is important. (Jenkins 1992, 9-49).<sup>8</sup> While Danes-as-Angela's performance produced

political Internet fan discourse, these practices also constructed her body as a morphological text appropriable for political purposes. In this context and operating on the assumption that her teen female fans vicariously engage in, and seek out films in which she stars, Danes's body in Luhrmann's *R+J* provides fans with an already inscribed, "private," and unregulated corporeal point of access into Luhrmann's *R+J*, which has the potential to displace "Shakespeare" and "Luhrmann" as auteurs. This body becomes a fantastic psychic space, analogous to the Internet or to bedroom culture; in that space female teen fans can negotiate their way around Danes's Juliet performance to try on different representations of "femininity" (McRobbie 1991, 188). If Danes-as-Juliet's body is already a site upon which these fans have developed the skills to negotiate their way around representations of femininity, then in *R+J* this body is a familiar, and potentially transformative, space upon which both public and private battles of adolescent female subjectivity can be imagined and articulated, and the cultural power of "Shakespeare" reappropriated.

In *R+J* as in her previous work, Danes represents a transitory "femininity" that resonates with the teen female viewer's own physical and psychological maturation. This continued and continually transforming connection, further consolidated through Danes's growing professional filmography, has implications for the ways in which the female teen spectator imagines her own developing gender and sexual identities. The psychic interplay produced out of fan/star relations is at once "private" and "public" in that Danes's "private" persona and "public" cinematic representations of "femininity" affect how the female teen spectator imagines herself both publicly and privately. It also illuminates the potential fluidity involved in psychically and physically performing "femininity," to suggest that femininity is something that is constantly changing and subject to negotiation and renegotiation. On another level, as teen female viewers articulate their "private" imaginings of "femininity" in "public" on-line chat rooms and bodily inscription (and by this I mean changing one's hair color, dress, and make-up to create a physical likeness to the star), potentially political links between adolescent girls can be made that hold great empowering potential in relation to controlling and negotiating representations of femininity with whom they identify.

### Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996)

In his readings of popular Hollywood films, Richard Maltby argues that studios try to please as many audience members as possible, and that they endeavor to create multiple points of audience-appeal through such factors as genre, narrative, and stardom (Maltby 2003). In this context, the teen female viewer first attracted to Danes on the basis of her performance in *MSCL* may apprehend *R+J* as a "Claire Danes movie" rather than as Luhrmann's Shakespearean debut or

as a Shakespearean film. If stardom can be considered as a competing mode of authorship, then Danes's teen female fan-following constructs her as an agent of signification, and an authentic site of meaning, through which it engages with Luhrmann's filmic text and Shakespeare's play.

While teen female viewers may have been drawn to Danes's Juliet performance on the basis of their identification with her character in *MSCL*, the cinematic rhetoric utilized to establish audience identification in the television series, repeated in Luhrmann's *R+J* not only promoted viewer identification with her new character, but also connected up the two filmic endeavors to take the teen female fan on Danes's developmental passage from girlhood to womanhood. Two years later in Luhrmann's *R+J*, Danes's deployment of the gaze is the cinematic technique that most clearly allies her representation of Juliet with her previous role as Angela Chase. This strategy, which can be interpreted as a big-screen appropriation of Angela's small-screen first person narrative, reopens private and unregulated channels of identification between Danes-as-Juliet and her loyal teen female fan following. If Danes's body is an already inscribed site upon which teen female fans have previously experimented with an unfinished model of girlhood, then her role as Juliet moves forward to bridge, through sexual initiation, the transition from girlhood to womanhood. In the absence of fan discourse about *R+J* I will briefly examine how the film itself invites, cinematically, the types of identifications demonstrated in the previous part of the paper.

Juliet is introduced to the viewer through an extreme close-up as she floats suspended in the bathtub, strands of hair framing her face, which the water slightly blurs. Here, Danes establishes a direct gaze with her fan, inviting the filmgoer into her private underwater world. This secret moment, shared between Danes-as-Juliet and her fan, is the first of a series of direct gazes promoting audience identification with this character. Angela McRobbie's observation that girls' bedrooms provide "safe" sites in which to play and experiment with various "feminine" identities is important in this case (McRobbie 1991, 188) and provides a neat analogy to Danes's cinematic exchange with her fan in the space of her underwater and bedroom worlds. Within these spaces, Danes-as-Juliet's gaze positions her often partly undressed body as a private, unregulated fantasy space upon which the fan can experiment with her own developing gender and sexual identity.

Like Angela's mother, whom she sometimes hates (and about whom she confesses "Lately, I can't even look at my mother without wanting to stab her repeatedly" [*MSCL* 1994]), Juliet's narcissistic, drag-like mother Gloria Capulet validates Danes-as-Juliet as the film's most authentic and desirable representation of femininity and a key site inviting teen female audience identification. Her freshly scrubbed, natural, and "real" feminine beauty contrasts sharply with Gloria's disheartening efforts to beautify herself for the Capulet Ball. In a grotesque parody of femininity, Gloria appears on the stairs, her face heavily painted, torso cinched in a white corset,

legs encased in white suspenders and stockings and arms flailing in a translucent pink fur-trimmed gown. Her physical appearance and sly advice to Juliet on the merits of female duplicity only heightens an unreceptive Juliet's white, winged angelic appeal.

In one of the film's most critically discussed scenes, DiCaprio-as-Romeo first meets Danes-as-Juliet at the Capulet Ball and holds her gaze through the watery feminine space of the aquarium, which symbolically divides the men's bathroom and ladies' powder room. His appropriation and return of Danes-as-Juliet's gaze brings the film's codified "masculine" and "feminine" worlds into explicit contact and exchange. Danes-as-Juliet's return of the gaze (which she has previously held with the viewer) invites the teen female fan to share her private, intimate exchange, and accompany her on her rite-of-passage into womanhood.

Through his appropriation of Danes-as-Juliet's gaze, the androgynous DiCaprio-as-Romeo appears to become more "feminine," repeatedly to traverse and destabilize gender binaries. Danes's androgyny serves an equally subversive function. Despite her long, "feminine" hair, Danes's pubescent, curve-less body (and this is especially evident when she stands in a sweatshirt and pants talking to the Nurse) is one that could easily be mistaken for Romeo's. The two teen stars' neither-sexed bodies, their repeated appropriation of the gaze from one another, and their progressive blurring of "masculine" and "feminine" worlds and codes of conduct construct their bodies as open sites upon which the fan can experiment with, negotiate, and renegotiate gender and sexual identities.

In the balcony scene, when she believes herself to be alone, Danes-as-Juliet re-establishes eye contact with the viewer to declare her love for Romeo:

What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other word would smell as sweet.  
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called  
Retain that dear perfection which he owes  
Without that title.<sup>9</sup>

*(A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)* When Romeo surprises her and they both plunge into the pool, Luhrmann's underwater cinematography allows the teen female fan to experience vicariously their passionate embrace and the beginning of Juliet's initiation into womanhood.

Following her marriage to Romeo, Juliet sits alone, curled up in the fetal position — a small figure on her ornate egg-blue double-bed, which resembles a shrine with all of its winged Mary-like ornaments, illuminated and surrounded by candles.

In this scene, the bed is the film's focus, and Juliet's virginity the sacred centerpiece. Returning to the first-person narrative style first used by Angela Chase in *MSCL*, an eager and joyous Danes-as-Juliet privately shares her anticipation with the viewer:

Oh, I have bought the mansion of a love,  
But not possessed it, and though I am sold  
Not yet enjoyed. Oh, tedious is this day  
As is the day before some festival  
To an impatient child that has new robes  
And may not wear them.

*(A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)* Her employment of Shakespeare's "robe" metaphor to describe the putting on of the robe of womanhood through the sexual act invites the viewer into her sexual awakening and culminates in a softly lit, tender love scene.

Significantly, the interchangeability and fluidity of gendered and sexed positions within the filmic narrative correlates with the teen female fans' own developing and unstable gender and sexed identities. In this context, the star-body of Danes provides her teen female fans with an overriding cultural text upon which to explore and experiment with sexed and gendered identity positions. These processes of identification through psychic experimentation can result in transformations of gender and sexed identities outside the cinema itself.

The link between the "private" space of Juliet's bedroom and the bed in the tomb upon which she finds herself following the consumption of Friar Lawrence's sleeping draught forges disturbing connections between female sexual experience, death, and violence, which encourage teen female viewers to challenge traditional sexual constructions and roles. Romeo's intrusion into this deadly world, an excessive imitation of Juliet's bedroom lit up with hundreds of electric candles and ten neon crosses, is a ghoulish inversion of the marriage scene. Walking down the aisle, he climbs onto the bed with Juliet, stroking her face and placing his ring on her finger. Kissing her on the lips, he drinks the vial of poison. Oblivious, Juliet — in a gaze only the audience sees — awakes as he dies. Crying and alone on the bed, she holds a final gaze with the audience, pulls the trigger of the gun, aiming at her head, and shoots herself. In this scene, the camera cuts back from its repeated close-ups to a shot of both in a bloody embrace, then to a slide show of happy images of the pair together, ending with the underwater kiss that marked the beginning of their relationship. The screen then

fades out to white. This whiteness becomes the body bags of the lovers, captured on live television by the black newsreader who opened the film accompanied with the voice-over, a receding image of the television that goes fuzzily blank, and then completely black.

While this scene marks Danes-as-Juliet's on-screen death, Danes's star-status rescues her from this grievous moment. Although she dies within the filmic narrative, extra-textual variables, such as her stardom and fan following, refract back onto this moment of cinematic death to create a sense of dissonance. Upon realising that Danes is not truly dead and will be resurrected in future filmic endeavors to engage in the performance of alternative representations of femininity, the teen female fan is interpellated in this moment of "death" and in the multiple crossings of the divides between masculine/feminine, private/public, comedy/tragedy, life/death and girlhood/womanhood.

Importantly, the relationship between Danes and her teen female fan following is one of mutual dialectical exchange that continues to circulate outside of Luhrmann's *R+J*. While Danes's teen female fans understand Luhrmann's *R+J* as a "Claire Danes movie" and construct her as an agent of signification, her star-presence offers them private, unregulated, embodied access to Luhrmann's film and Shakespeare's play. If her body, through fan practices, becomes a site of competing auteurship with Luhrmann and Shakespeare, then it is also one that provides the teen female fan with a mediating point of access through which they can negotiate, renegotiate, and perhaps even appropriate some of the cultural power associated with Shakespeare.

### Notes

1. A representative sample of these teenpics includes: Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995); Wes Craven's *Scream* trilogy (1996, 1997, 2000); Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (*R+J*, 1996b); James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997); Jim Gillespie's *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1998); John McNaughton's *Wild Things* (1998); Robert Iscove's *She's All That* (1999); and Roger Kumble's *Cruel Intentions* (1999).
2. References to the works of Shakespeare come from the *Riverside Shakespeare*, 2d edition, unless otherwise noted (Evans 1997).
3. Based on the successful Broadway hit of the same name (Bernstein, Laurents, and Sondheim 1957), the groundbreaking and dynamic film *West Side Story* (Robbins 1961) was released to wide acclaim. An updated version of *Romeo and Juliet*, the film adapted the traditional love story and elaborated upon Juliet's ethnicity to locate racial strife between rival New York street gangs — the newly arrived Puerto Rican Sharks and the Anglo Jets — as a source of major dramatic conflict. The film's fusion of cultures and inclusion of adolescent gang warfare played

out in the backdrop of America crystallized *Romeo and Juliet*'s status as a key text for the struggles of post-war Euro-American teen identity.

4. In terms of marketing, associated commercial merchandise in the form of a record (including composer Nino Rota's multiple scores derived from festival and liturgical sequences and Glen Weston's on-screen performance of "What is a Youth?" [Rota 1989]) became a must-have consumer item with Anglo-American teens.
5. In 1997, the (typically female) readers of *Seventeen* magazine voted Luhrmann's *R+J* the "Movie of the Year." Pauline Adamek confirms *R+J*'s popularity with a specifically female audience: "To date, the film's audience has been made up of a high proportion of teenaged girls and young women" (12).
6. Danes's filmography includes: *Shopgirl* (Martin 2004); *Stage Beauty* (Eyre 2004); *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (Cameron 2003); *The Rage In Placid Lake* (Macgowan 2003); *It's All About Love* (Rukov 2003); *The Hours* (Daldry 2002); *Igby Goes Down* (Steers 2002); *Brokedown Palace* (Caplan 1999); *The Mod Squad* (Silver 1999); *Les Misérables* (August 1998); *Polish Wedding* (Connelly 1998); *The Rainmaker* (Coppola 1997); *U Turn* (Stone 1997); *Princess Mononoke* (Miyazaki 1999); *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (Luhrmann 1996b); *To Gillian on Her 37th Birthday* (Pressman 1996); *I Love You, I Love You Not* (Hopkins 1996); *The Pesky Suitor* (Young 1995); *Home for the Holidays* (Foster 1995); *How to Make an American Quilt* (Moorhouse 1995); *My So-Called Life* (Holzman 1994), TV Series; *Little Women* (Armstrong 1994); and *Dreams of Love* (Mueller 1990).
7. After airing its last episode on January 26, 1995, ABC canceled the show after it spent the fall at the bottom of the Nielsen ratings.
8. See de Certeau 1998. Jenkins appropriates de Certeau's model of "poaching," in which audience members adapt a text for themselves. See also Fiske 1992.
9. Juliet's speeches are quoted from the film (Luhrmann 1996b)

### Online Resources

Internet Movie Database information for *Brokedown Palace*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0120620/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *Clueless*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0112697/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *Cruel Intentions*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0139134/>

Internet Movie Database information for *Dreams of Love*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0099466/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *Get Over It*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0192071/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *To Gillian on Her 37th Birthday*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0117924/>.



Internet Movie Database information for *The Goldwyn Follies*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0030194/>.

Internet Movie Database information for Almereyda's *Hamlet*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0171359/>

Internet Movie Database information for *Home for the Holidays*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0113321/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *The Hours*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0274558/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *How to Make an American Quilt*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0113347/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *Igby Goes Down*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0280760/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *I Know What You Did Last Summer*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0119345/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *I Love You, I Love You Not*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0116592/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *It's All About Love*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0273689/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *Les Misérables*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0119683/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *Little Women*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0110367/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *O*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0184791/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *The Mod Squad*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0120757/>.

Unofficial website of *My So-Called Life*. <http://www.mscl.com> [cited 23 May 2006].

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Internet Movie Database information for *The Pesky Suitor*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0256992/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *Polish Wedding*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0119910/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *The Rage In Placid Lake*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0305999/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *Princess Mononoke*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0119698/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *The Rainmaker*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0119978/>.

Internet Movie Database information for Castellani's *Romeo and Juliet*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0047029/>.

Internet Movie Database information for Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0028203/>.

Internet Movie Database information for Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0117509/>.

Internet Movie Database information for Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0063518/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *Scream* ( <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0117571/>), *Scream 2* ( <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120082/> and *Scream 3* ( <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0134084/>).

Internet Movie Database information for *She's All That*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0160862/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *Shopgirl*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0338427/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *Stage Beauty*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0368658/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *10 Things I Hate About You*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0147800/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0181852/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *Titanic*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0120338/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *U Turn*. <http://imdb.com/title/tt0120399/>.

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