Off the Shelves

Old Tales Made New Again: Shakespeare’s Place in Young Adult Literature

The lives of English teachers are filled with variety and a few dependable constants. Grading stacks of essays is one such constant, and another is often the teaching of Shakespeare. For some of us, teaching Shakespeare is a burden, one shared by many of our students; for others, it’s an unbridled joy. The rest of us seem to fall somewhere in the middle; we certainly don’t hate the Bard, and we have our personal favorite plays and sonnets, but the struggle is making the works accessible to students.

In her marvelous book, *Reading Shakespeare with Young Adults*, Mary Ellen Dakin notes that all teachers must grapple with the question of why we teach Shakespeare, as well as the natural follow-up question of how to teach him. Both are highly subjective questions, influenced by personal preference, school and district curricular requirements, and the students with whom we work. Given that Shakespeare’s language is perhaps the biggest obstacle for young readers, it can help if teachers can employ bridge texts, which share similar themes and characters as the Shakespearean works, but are more easily accessible and (perhaps) engaging. There are a number of young adult titles that could fit this curricular void: books that present tales through the eyes of other Shakespearean characters, transport the plays’ themes to other times and locations, and repackage Shakespeare in different and exciting ways.

One novel that relies heavily on Shakespeare’s work, and which has quickly found its way into English teachers’ hearts, is Gary Schmidt’s *The Wednesday Wars* (Clarion, 2007). Readers follow Holling Hoodwood through his tumultuous seventh-grade year on Long Island during the late 1960s. The Vietnam War is being waged overseas and on the evening news. Holling, the only Presbyterian in a school filled with Jewish and Catholic students, must spend his Wednesday afternoons with Mrs. Baker while his schoolmates attend religious instruction. The relationship between Holling and Mrs. Baker begins on rocky footing (Holling is convinced she hates him), but it slowly grows as the two spend their weekly time together. Schmidt has woven timeless lessons from Shakespeare throughout the book, which effectively combines the inner angst of growing up with the cultural upheaval of the Vietnam era.

One of the most popular Shakespeare plays in secondary curricula is *Romeo and Juliet*, and Sharon Draper’s *Romiette and Julio* (Atheneum, 1999) provides a more upbeat, modern twist on the familiar tale of star-crossed lovers. At times, Draper seems to borrow more heavily from another 20th-century version of the play, *West Side Story*, as her book relies on themes of race and gangs. Draper puts some interesting spins on the original, such as when the two lovers meet in an online chat room, rather than at a party. Other elements, such as when Romiette and Julio are set adrift in a boat by gang members, may strain credibility to a certain degree. Still, this can be used as an effective companion to Shakespeare.

Other young adult titles have used Juliet’s character as a springboard for modernized connections to the play. In *Saving Juliet* by Suzanne Selfors (Walker, 2008),
Mimi Wallingford is a modern 17-year-old and the latest in a long and famous Broadway line of actors. She’s been acting since an early age and feels trapped by her circumstances. While portraying Juliet in a production of the Shakespeare play, she unknowingly breaks a charm, and she and her leading man are transported back to the time of the Montagues and Capulets; there, she meets and befriends the real Juliet, and she has an opportunity to change the outcome of Juliet’s relationship with Romeo. But should she?

Suzanne Harper’s *The Juliet Club* (Harper, 2008) introduces readers to Kate, a high school junior and the daughter of a renowned Shakespearean scholar. Kate is the anti-Juliet: decidedly unromantic after coming off a bad relationship. When she wins a writing contest, sponsored by none other than the University of Verona, she gets the opportunity to take a summer Shakespeare seminar in Italy. While there, she and the other students are charged with working with the Juliet Club, answering letters written to Juliet seeking relationship advice. The book combines elements of *Romeo and Juliet*, of course, but also *Much Ado about Nothing*, and even *Henry V*, offering readers a light, fun diversion.

In *Juliet Immortal* (Delacorte, 2011), Stacey Jay not only updates the Romeo and Juliet love story but adds a supernatural spin as well. In this retelling, Juliet did not take her own life but was murdered by Romeo, in a move to assure himself immortality. In a twist of fate, though, Juliet is granted eternity of her own, and she spends the ensuing 700 years fighting Romeo to protect the souls of true lovers. This is a drastic shakeup to the traditional story, but one that could appeal to readers hungry for a new take on old tales.

Another popular play for high school study is *Macbeth*, which has also received its fair share of adaptations. Caroline B. Cooney’s *Enter Three Witches* (Scholastic, 2007) retells the events of the play through the eyes of Mary, a 14-year-old ward of Lord and Lady Macbeth. When her father, Lord Cawdor, betrays the Scottish king and is hanged as a traitor, Mary becomes trapped in the castle with the power-hungry Macbeths. Readers can identify with Mary’s loss and cheer for her as she attempts to save more lives from ruin, and she finds her courage to do so. Cooney weaves quotes from the original play throughout the novel and provides readers already familiar with the play an intriguing perspective on the tragedy; for those who have not read or seen *Macbeth*, the novel should encourage them to pick it up and get to know the source material.

Lisa Klein brings a strong feminist reading to the play in *Lady Macbeth’s Daughter* (Bloomsbury, 2009). Albia is the secret daughter of the Macbeths, born with a deformity and sent away by Lord Macbeth. She has been living with three sisters, who coincidentally are the three witches, while Lady Macbeth grieves for the daughter she believes to have died. Klein portrays a much more sympathetic Lady Macbeth in this incarnation, as a woman whose desperation is fueled by the loss of a child. Readers of the play will find many close connections in this text, and much to discuss.

*Othello*, Shakespeare’s account of desire and betrayal, finds new life in Mal Peet’s *Exposure* (Candlewick, 2009). This powerful treatise on race, fame, and privacy follows Othello, a talented soccer player who has just been signed to the professional franchise in an unnamed South American country. Othello has been warned that
he may face resentment in this region, because of his race, but the enormous contract, and the fame that will accompany it, is too much to pass up. Soon after joining the team, Otello elopes with Desmerelda, the daughter of a powerful local politician and a celebrity in her own right. The press sensationalizes the mixed-race couple’s story, but the tabloids have a field day when a young girl, who has idolized Desmerelda, turns up dead, and suspicion is cast on Otello. Julius Lester’s brief novelization, Othello (Scholastic, 1995), transplants the action from Venice to Elizabethan England, yet keeps the plot of the play intact, with one important reconceptualization: in Lester’s version, Othello, Iago, and Emilia (Iago’s wife) are all African and share a common past prior to being brought to England. By removing racial intent from Iago’s actions, Lester focuses more on the dangers of passion and the differences between perception and reality. While some of the major characters are cast in a new light, the tragic outcome of the story remains the same.

Considered perhaps Shakespeare’s greatest tragedy, Hamlet receives a lighter touch in Lizzie Zindel’s A Girl, A Ghost, and the Hollywood Hills (Viking, 2010). Zindel reverses the gender makeup of the play for her novel, in which Holly returns from boarding school to find that her father, the head of a powerful Hollywood production company, is now dating her deceased mother’s sister (Aunt Claudia, no less). Following the Shakespearean plot, Holly becomes convinced that Claudia has murdered her mother, and she plots her revenge. Zindel’s version, complete with a Rodeo Drive atmosphere and burgeoning romance, doesn’t stick too closely to the play, but it does provide enough connections to merit reading one with the other. In Hamlet (Candlewick, 2009), John Marsden updates the play to modern times, relying on prose instead of dialogue and stage direction, without losing any of the original’s psychological intensity or suspense. Lisa Klein’s Ophelia (Bloomsbury, 2006) focuses on one of the more intriguing characters of the original play, and by having Ophelia narrate her own story, readers can see other ways Shakespeare could be interpreted. Other characters are drawn differently through Ophelia’s eyes, as well; Polonius is seen as a neglectful father, and Gertrude as a concerned and doting mentor to the young girl. While staying close to the original text and integrating key scenes and lines into the novel, Ophelia also alters and extends the play, allowing Ophelia to experience some true happiness beyond the walls of Elsinore. In Michelle Ray’s tremendous debut novel, Falling for Hamlet (Poppy, 2011), Ophelia is once again the narrator of the novel and tells her side of things during both a lengthy police interrogation and on an Oprah-esque talk show, soon after the events of the play have transpired. Ray sets the tragedy in modern-day Denmark, so Ophelia must not only deal with her incredibly complicated relationship with Hamlet but also hordes of tabloid media and hidden cameras around the royal palace. Books such as these extend tremendous possibilities for readers and teachers already familiar with the characters, but also offer a fantastic gateway for new audiences.

Alan Gratz has created two sharp, witty mysteries around two of Shakespeare’s most renowned plays. In Something Rotten (Dial, 2007), Horatio Wilkes helps his best friend, Hamilton Prince, solve the murder of his father in
Denmark, Tennessee. The mystery involves environmental pollution of the Copenhagen River and more one-liners and Hamlet references than can be listed here. *Something Wicked* (Dial, 2008) follows Horatio through another case, this time at a Scottish Highland Fair (held, of course, on Mount Birnam), with his friend, Mac. Both Wilkes mysteries rely on some knowledge of the plays to get every inside joke, but the mystery element, teen humor, and fast-paced plots will hook many readers.

It should be noted that Shakespeare's tragedies do not provide the only fertile ground for modern retellings. His comedies find new legs in several YA novels as well. Jody Gehrman provides a caffeine jolt to *Much Ado about Nothing in Confessions of a Triple Shot Betty* (Dial, 2008). Geena is excited to spend the summer working in the coffee shop with her friend Amber and her cousin Hero. But once Amber and Hero meet, they hate each other instantly, and Geena's dreams of the three working in harmony disappear. In the midst of romantic entanglements and mistaken identities, Gehrman offers female characters dealing with emotional issues, albeit with a lighthearted touch. A. E. Cannon, in *The Loser's Guide to Life and Love* (Harper, 2008), introduces readers to Ed, who works his summer job at a movie store, hanging out with his two best friends, even while wearing an incorrect name tag. When a beautiful girl believes Ed to be the Brazilian “Sergio” that his tag claims he is, and Ed’s friends start to develop crushes among each other, it becomes apparent how this book owes its plot to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Another way to introduce or supplement Shakespeare is through graphic representations, which make the characters and words leap from the pages. Gareth Hinds has written and illustrated two magnificent interpretations of Shakespeare: *Merchant of Venice* (Candlewick, 2008) and *King Lear* (Candlewick, 2009). Visually, the two texts are stunning. *Merchant of Venice* employs pale colors and more realistic drawing, perhaps due to his updating the tale to more modern times, while *King Lear* exhibits more figurative illustrations, with broad splashes of color. The mistake that many graphic representations make with Shakespeare is simply “dumbing it down” and oversimplifying the essential plot points. Hinds does nothing of the sort, instead using visual imagery to clarify Shakespeare’s language. In *Merchant of Venice*, he employs an interesting exercise, by beginning the novel with modernized dialogue, hanging out with his two best friends, even while wearing an incorrect name tag. When a beautiful girl believes Ed to be the Brazilian “Sergio” that his tag claims he is, and Ed’s friends start to develop crushes among each other, it becomes apparent how this book owes its plot to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

In *Something Wicked*, he employs an interesting exercise, by beginning the novel with modernized dialogue, and then gradually transitioning to the original unedited text, so that by the time a reader reaches the end of the novel, where many of the more famous speeches occur, the reader may be much more comfortable with the language.

In the Shakespearean plays adapted by John McDonald for Classical Comics, the language barrier is addressed in multiple ways. Under the direction of Clive Bryant, this British publishing house produces three graphic versions of selected Shakespeare plays: Original Text, which maintains Shakespeare’s words, with some cuts; Plain Text, translated
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into more modern English; and Quick Text, a version with less dialogue, for a faster-paced read. The adaptations are illustrated in dramatic and engaging fashion, and the multitude of language approaches will work to open Shakespeare’s world to even the most reluctant reader. Currently, there are adaptations available for Macbeth (Classical Comics, 2008), Romeo and Juliet (Classical Comics, 2009), Henry V (Classical Comics, 2008), The Tempest (Classical Comics, 2009), and A Midsummer Night’s Dream (Classical Comics, 2011), with adaptations soon to come for Julius Caesar and Hamlet.

It would definitely be up to teachers to decide which, if any, of these retellings are appropriate for their particular students and curricula, but whether these novels are used to introduce or supplement the teaching of Shakespeare, or are simply passed along to interested students, the titles above can help demonstrate how Shakespeare continues to influence our culture, and how his stories and characters continually breathe with new life and vigor.

Work Cited

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