

From *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to *Romeo and Juliet* through Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet*. The *Levi's 501* advertisement

Abstract: The article deals with advertising as entailing adaptation practices through which Shakespeare's plays might find a new and popularised identity, and a new means for the reception of Shakespeare's plays by a large and contemporary audience. The paper will provide an analysis of the *Levi's 501* 2005 advertisement presented as an adaptation of 3.1 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The advertisement will be compared to the famous cinema adaptation *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet* by Baz Luhrmann (1996) to show how the latter influences the construction and interpretation of the advertisement as an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* rather than of 3.1 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, of which, however, the advertisement reproduces several lines. The study of the advertisement will show the various adaptive strategies put into place. The article will delineate the presence of an intertextual net which comprises the advertisement, the film, and the plays themselves, an intertextual net whose various elements, if familiar to the audience, dialogue with each other to produce the connotative potential of the advertising message.

Keywords: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Shakespeare*, *Baz Luhrmann*, *advertising*, *adaptation*

1. Advertising and Adaptation

One of the fields that are less commonly included in the critical dialogue concerning Shakespearean adaptations is that of advertising. As this article illuminates, in the space of advertising Shakespearean adaptation potentially finds a new and popularised presentation, constituting a new means for the reception of Shakespeare's plays by a large and contemporary audience. As Graham Holderness observes, "every act of scholarly reproduction, critical interpretation, theatrical performance, stage and screen adaptation, or fictional appropriation produces a new and hitherto unconceived Shakespeare".¹ In this article I examine the 2005 *Levi's 501* jeans Shakespearean advertisement² to show how it features examples of adaptation of two Shakespeare plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as how the multi-layered adaptation is also in dialogue with Baz Luhrmann's screen adaptation *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet* (1996).³ I argue that, while the *Levi's 501* advertisement is presented as an adaptation of 3.1. of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the setting and the construction of the scene, along with the characters' costumes, language, and attitudes, all seem to refer to Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet*. While parts of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are quoted directly in the advertisement, the meaning is altered by the visual representation which creates an intertextual connection to Luhrmann's film. I will show that in the passage from Shakespearean plays to advertising, various adaptive strategies are put into place, and that recognition of the Shakespearean citations elicits the presence of an intertextual net that comprises advertisements, plays, and other adaptations of the plays themselves.

As Linda Hutcheon outlines, the term adaptation is "broad enough to allow to treat not just films and stage productions, but also musical arrangements and song covers, visual art revisitations of prior works and comic book versions of history, poems put to music and remakes of films, and videogames and

¹ Graham Holderness, "Introduction: Creating Shakespeare", *Critical Survey*, 25.3 (2013), 1-3, 1.

² Noam Murro, *Levi's 501 Jeans, A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bartle Bogle Hegarty, 2005. Available at: www.youtube.com.

³ Baz Luhrmann, *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet*, United States, 20th Century Fox, 1996.

interactive art”.⁴ Both Hutcheon and Douglas Lanier refer to advertising as possibly entailing adaptation. Hutcheon considers “the Volkswagen *Darth Vader Super Bowl* (2011) advertisement” as an adaptation⁵ and Lanier claims that advertising appears along other “categor[ies] of contemporary pop culture” as featuring “examples of Shakespearean allusion or adaptation”.⁶ Advertising is, however, very seldom taken into consideration in critical debates on Shakespearean adaptation, due in part to its commercial context and the high level of variation undergone by the source material in such contexts. My article addresses this lacuna by adding advertising to the critical discussions on Shakespearean adaptation, thus bringing new perspectives to the fore: the *Levi's 501* example is one where the advertisement is in dialogue with both *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet* via the mediation of Luhrmann's film (itself in dialogue with *West Side Story*).

When talking about Shakespearean advertisements in general and the *Levi's 501* in particular I use the term adaptation as Linda Hutcheon and Julie Sanders intend it, as a term also describing “sequels, prequels, compression, and amplification” that “all have a role to play at different times in the adaptive mode”.⁷ Since it involves the passage from a genre to another, the advertising adaptation of plays can be seen as a “transpositional practice, casting a specific genre into another generic mode, an act of revision in itself” which might indulge in the “exercise of trimming and pruning”⁸ as is the case with the one-minute-long *Levi's 501* advertisement which presents only one scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* while also alluding to the plot and main themes of *Romeo and Juliet*. The adaptive practices put into place by the *Levi's* advertisement partake in an attempt at making “texts ‘relevant’ or easily comprehensible to new audiences and readerships via the processes of proximation and updating”.⁹ The aim, in the case of advertising, is to make full use of the Shakespearean text, which is made more comprehensible in order to sell goods and to render commodities more appealing by associating them to Shakespeare's prestige and linguistic richness, unintentionally contributing to foster the proximation of the text to the contemporary audience. By doing so the “pleasure of the original representation”¹⁰ is prolonged and memory is repeated.¹¹ Although this is not the main aim of Shakespearean advertising, in which the use of the Shakespearean material is deeply connected to the commercial end of the communication, at the same time, “juxtaposed readings that are crucial to the cultural operations of adaptation” are fostered by the advertising communication, thus enhancing “the ongoing experiences of pleasure for the reader or spectator in tracing the intertextual relationships”.¹² We can talk of adaptation in regards to advertising since what is mostly relevant in this case is the “inherent sense of play, produced in part by the activation of our informed sense of similarity and difference between the texts being invoked, and the connected interplay of expectation and surprise, that for me lies at the heart of the experience of adaptation and appropriation”.¹³ In the space of similarity the *Levi's 501* plays on the verbal similarities with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* thus producing the audience's pleasure derived from the recognition of the reference.¹⁴ The same feeling is produced by the recognition of the similarity with Luhrmann's visual poetics. This, however, clashes with the text being performed for a spectator familiar with the text of the play; the difference of the costumes, setting, and outcome of the encounter,

⁴ Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Second Edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁶ Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2002), 3.

⁷ Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ John Ellis, ‘The Literary Adaptation: An Introduction’, *Screen*, 23.1 (1982), 3-5, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ On the effect of brief citations to Shakespeare on screen see Alexa Alice Joubin and Victoria Bladen, eds., *Onscreen Allusions to Shakespeare: International Films, Television, and Theatre* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

united with the similarities highlighted, creates this sense of expectation and surprise that connects the adaptation with the adapted text.

This article also starts from the consideration that what has often been considered as “not Shakespeare”,¹⁵ “from popular songs to advertisements for beer”,¹⁶ as well as animes and videogames, or accidental references,¹⁷ is now being reconsidered as part of the possible Shakespearean adaptations and appropriations that are gaining a place in the “continuum” of “the basic activities constituting Shakespeare studies”.¹⁸ As Desmet et al. note, “the more often people detect echoes of Shakespeare in particular works, the more definitively these works become part of the Shakespeare canon, whether or not they are ‘really’ Shakespeare”,¹⁹ and this can be true for advertising adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays too. As the latest theories on adaptation posit, “an adaptation’s double nature does not mean ... that proximity or fidelity to the adapted text should be the criterion of judgment or the focus of analysis”.²⁰ The association of advertising with adaptation is seen here in light of the consideration that “adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication”.²¹

Furthermore, including consideration of Shakespearean adaptation in the context of advertising adaptation accords with the “breakdown of the traditional distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture”²² that has previously informed the relation between literature and other media forms. Discourses pertaining to film adaptation may be applied to advertising adaptation too, particularly where advertisements take the form of short narrative films. We can think of adaptation as a “multileveled negotiation of intertexts”,²³ as Robert Stam argues, in which texts are “caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin”.²⁴

The *Levi's 501* advertisement can be seen in terms of Hutcheon’s concept of a “palimpsest” that viewers experience “through [their] memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation”.²⁵ In this case, the palimpsestuous nature of the advertisement is accentuated by the presence of innumerable intertextual references. While the advertisement is presented as an adaptation of Act 3, Scene 1 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the setting and the construction of the scene, along with the characters’ costumes, language, and attitudes reference Luhrmann’s *Romeo+Juliet*.²⁶ Thus, the film adaptation becomes the vehicle through which the advertisement evokes *Romeo and Juliet*.

2. William Shakespeare’s *Romeo+Juliet* and Advertising

Luhrmann’s *Romeo+Juliet* perfectly exemplifies Shakespeare’s popularisation. The film stands as a milestone of contemporary adaptations of Shakespeare in popular culture: it has influenced the successive trends in films dedicated to teenage audiences – see, for instance, just to name one, the film *Warm*

¹⁵ Christy Desmet et al., eds., *Shakespeare / Not Shakespeare* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

¹⁶ Christy Desmet et al., “Introduction” in Desmet et al., *Shakespeare / Not Shakespeare*, 3. Here the authors refer to Graham Holderness’ *Tales from Shakespeare: Creative Collisions* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2014).

¹⁷ Desmet et al., *Shakespeare / Not Shakespeare*.

¹⁸ Holderness, *Tales from Shakespeare*, xi, quoted in Desmet et al., “Introduction”, 3.

¹⁹ Desmet et al., “Introduction”, 12.

²⁰ Hutcheon and O’Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 6,7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²² Ian Olney, “Texts, Technologies, and Intertextualities: Film Adaptation in a Postmodern World”, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 38.3 (2010), 166-170, 168.

²³ Robert Stam, “Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation”, in James Naremore, ed., *Film Adaptation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2000), 54-76, 67.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁵ Hutcheon and O’Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 8.

²⁶ On screen adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*, see Victoria Bladen et al., eds., *Shakespeare on Screen: “Romeo and Juliet”* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2023).

Bodies by Jonathan Levine²⁷ – in general and in Shakespearean films in particular, as well as constituting a key example for productions in the field of popular culture, thus also influencing advertising. As I will show, the film's influence on the *Levi's 501* 2005 advertisement is one example. Another very clear instance of this phenomenon is David LaChapelle's 2005 short film advertisement for H&M's jeans – *Romeo & Juliet*, which is unmistakably inspired by Baz Luhrmann's film. The *Levi's* advertisement came before the H&M one and the two ads are very similar in their construction as well as in the references to Baz Luhrmann's film. This might point to an influence of the *Levi's* ad on the H&M one. As Magdalena Cieślak points out when speaking of the H&M ad, it "decentre[s] Shakespeare as a source by appropriating Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet* (1996), rather than the play-text, as a key hypotext".²⁸ As will be seen, the same process is at play in the *Levi's* advertising adaptation.

Luhrmann's film combines the plot, characters, and lines of Shakespeare's play with contemporary commercial and visual culture. As one reviewer Peter Travers observed:

It's a good thing that Shakespeare gets his name in the title, or you might mistake the opening scenes for Quentin Tarantino's *Romeo and Juliet*. No dialogue, just gunshots, as two gang families – the Montagues and the Capulets (each has its name in lights on the roof of a high-rise) – go to war. Welcome to mythical Verona Beach, where the gangs fire on each other, and soldiers in choppers fire on them. Shot in Mexico in a style that might be called retrofuturistic, since it encompasses castles and armor, as well as bulletproof vests and boomboxes, the film reworks Shakespeare in a frenzy of jump cuts that makes most rock videos look like MTV on Midol.²⁹

The pace of Luhrmann's film is video-clip like; accompanied by a soundtrack of contemporary songs, and several of the scenes are delivered in very fast shots (sometimes accelerated in Luhrmann's distinctive style). As the director commented:

And as for the quick editing, that comes from the fact that I do not like to be bored. It's about rhythm. The opening sequence is very fast and it's trying to keep ahead of the audience. Even if you look at the play, the style of the piece is you come out and say this is what's gonna happen, they're gonna die. Then you introduce all the characters and they're actually little vignettes.³⁰

Romeo+Juliet has become part of present-day popular culture, and a seminal film in the contemporary, post-modern, intertextual, and intermedial interpretation of Shakespeare. As one commentator Guy Lodge noted, in 2016, "Detachable angel wings became a default prom accessory; blue-tinted fairy lights were resourcefully draped over household fish tanks" and "two decades on, stray sounds and images from Luhrmann's film remain entirely vivid, if not entirely undated".³¹ The film was an apt intertext for the *Levi's* advertisement as the film adaptation itself encompasses numerous quotations and objects of modernity which become simulacra of our contemporary world and popular culture, conveyed through a pastiche of images and sounds, typical of the present-day communication saturated by advertising, which is ultimately able to deconstruct and, at the same time, to reproduce Shakespeare for our age.

The connection of the film with the commercial world is elicited from the beginning. The first image the audience sees is that of a TV set which turns on, a newsreader recites the prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* and the scenes of the "brawls on the street" are shown as if they were live footage. The whole film is framed by television and adopts this medium's way of communicating and imagery. As Luhrmann

²⁷ See Magdalena Cieślak, "Decentering the Hypotext with Denim and Zombies: Jonathan Levine's *Warm Bodies* (2013) and David LaChapelle's *Romeo & Juliet* (2005)", in Bladen et al., *Shakespeare on Screen: "Romeo and Juliet"*, 125-139.

²⁸ Cieślak, "Decentering the Hypotext", 125.

²⁹ Peter Travers, "Review of *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet*", *Rolling Stone*, (November 1996).

³⁰ Pauline Adamek, "*Romeo and Juliet*: Interview with Baz Luhrmann", *POP-film* (November 1996).

³¹ Guy Lodge, "*Romeo+Juliet* at 20: Baz Luhrmann's adaptation refuses to age", *The Guardian*, 1 November 2016, www.theguardian.com.

reflected, "Because we are so used to zapping, I have used the idea of television as the story teller. TV is the chorus of our lives".³² As in televisual communication, multiple advertisements are interspersed in the scenes, often alluding to Shakespeare's other plays or famous quotations.

The first advertisements presented are that of *Montague Constructions*: "Retailled to Posterity by Montague Constructions", a quotation from *Richard III* Act 3, Scene 1 and that of *Phoenix gas* "Add more fuel to your fire", a quotation from *Henry VI, Part 3*, Act 5, Scene 4. From the first encounter of the Capulets with the Montagues onwards, an advertisement will accompany the whole film, that of "Wherefore. L'amour", a white word written in italics on a red background, patently referring to the Coca-Cola logo.³³ The recognition of the popular brand is inevitable, and the reference to it increases, once again, the popularisation of the Shakespearean subject and its link with advertising. The vision of the billboard in the film, even if its content is completely changed, leads to an immediate recognition of the Coca-Cola advertisement. This process could be paralleled with the manipulation of Shakespeare enacted by the director: in this case, the audience recognises the reference to the popular drink even if in a different shape, and similarly, Shakespeare is recognised even if in a different form. The reference is also to one of the most globalised and universal products and to the advertising linked to it, and this can possibly relate to the same ubiquity ascribable to Shakespeare and to *Romeo and Juliet*.

The first appearance of Romeo is associated to advertising too: he is first seen on the beach, sitting on an old carousel surrounded by crumbling walls on which some fading billboards are still visible. One, still intelligible, reads "Shoot Forth Thunder. ThunderBULLETS", a quotation from *Henry VI, Part 2*, Act 4, Scene 1. A few frames later, the motto of the Capulets appears in the background of the dialogue between Juliet's father and Paris: "Experience is by industry achiev'd", from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Act 1, Scene 3. The Capulet and Montague boys, as they are called in the film, resemble two rival gangs and quarrel in the streets menacing each other with their contemporary 'swords': guns, which, in their turn, still bear the traces of the contemporary commercial culture since they are branded with the two rival families' symbols.

The film is thus particularly apt for adaptation by advertising because it already contains many references to it and is almost constructed as an advertisement due to its fast-pace, the presence of various shots, the use of pop songs as a musical commentary on the scenes, as well as the visual richness. Even though they might remain empty for some, the intertextual allusions to Shakespeare's other works are unremitting. The continuous references testify to a way of representing and reproducing previous works which can be seen to parallel the creations of audio-visual advertising, constantly alluding to something else, borrowing from other texts to convey their own message through film, using, as another reviewer Janet Maslin noted, "the hyperkinetic vocabulary of post-modern kitsch".³⁴ A similar tendency can be observed in the *Levi's 501* advertisement which signifies through alluding to and borrowing from other texts.

3. The *Levi's 501* Ad and Its Shakespearean Intertexts

The *Levi's 501* advertisement was directed by Noam Murro for the advertising agency Bartle Bogle Hegarty, which boasts a long-standing relation with Levi's as the first brand advertised by the company.³⁵ The Shakespearean advertisement, as James Hamilton describes, was "expected to continue

³² Adamek, "Romeo and Juliet: Interview with Baz Luhrmann".

³³ The image is a distinguishing feature of Luhrmann's poetics also appearing in other films such as the previous *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) and the following *Moulin Rouge!* (2001).

³⁴ Janet Maslin, "Review of William Shakespeare's *Romeo+Juliet*", *The New York Times* (November 1996).

³⁵ From the agency's website: "We started in London in 1982 and our first ad for Levi's showed a herd of white sheep looking in one direction and one black sheep looking up and out in the opposite direction. This picture was accompanied by a simple

the flirtatious tone of Levi's current 'anti-fit' campaign".³⁶ The advertisement starts with the white text "A Midsummer Night's Dream. Act 3. Scene 1." on a red curtain which does not open on a theatre, as the audience might expect, but on an urban setting. The first parallel with Luhrmann's poetics is delineated from this opening scene. The label "Red Curtain Trilogy" has been given to the DVD boxed set containing three of the films directed by Luhrmann: *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *Romeo+Juliet* (1996), and *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) and derives from the connection of the three films with theatre.³⁷ *Strictly Ballroom* and *Moulin Rouge!* also begin with a red curtain opening on the scene, while in *Romeo+Juliet* the reference to theatre stands in Shakespeare's language, and in the ruins of a theatre on the beach which provide the background for Romeo and Tybalt's fight.

Anett Koch thus speaks of a "red curtain' aesthetics"³⁸ which has become a trademark for the director and was likely very well-known in 2005 to the audience of the advertisement. The traditionally theatrical opening of the red curtain on the advertisement's scene might be used to underline the discordance with the realistic urban scene which immediately follows it and to provoke the audience's surprise, thus increasing their curiosity. The red curtain, typically associated with theatre, is probably used to underline the connection with Shakespeare's theatre along with the presentation of the title, act and scene number of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on the curtain itself, although it is not typically that of an Elizabethan theatre,³⁹ while it is interestingly reminiscent of the ones used by Baz Luhrmann in his films (see Fig. 1)



Fig. 1: Red curtain opening, *Levi's 501* advertisement, screen capture, www.youtube.com.

The advertisement curtain opens on a scene portraying some people near a city wall in front of whom a car is parked. The car model and the urban setting recall Luhrmann's film, which used vintage cars (see Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).⁴⁰ The indefinite urban American area is similar to the film's setting in Verona Beach, an undefined American seaside city reminiscent of Venice Beach for its name and of Miami for the

statement that read 'When the world zigs, zag"'. Interestingly enough, a black sheep is now the logo of the agency, www.bartleoglehegarty.com.

³⁶ James Hamilton, "Shakespeare's Titania and Bottom inspire new Levi's ad", *Campaign UK* (2004), www.campaignlive.co.uk.

³⁷ See Louise Carey, *Baz Luhrmann's Red Curtain Trilogy: An Investigation of Theatrical Cinematic Techniques* (Design, Textiles, National College of Art and Design, Dublin. 2012) (doctoral dissertation).

³⁸ Anett Koch, *The Visual Aesthetics of Baz Luhrmann's "Red Curtain Cinema"* (Munich: GRIN Verlag, 2014).

³⁹ See Richard Hosley, "Shakespearean Stage Curtains: Then and Now", *College English*, 25.7 (1964), 488-492; Frederick Kiefer, "Curtains on the Shakespearean Stage", *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England*, 20 (2007), 151-186.

⁴⁰ In particular, the green car and the red one parked near the gang in the advertisement recall Tybalt's green car and Benvolio's red one in the opening scenes of the film for model and colour.

overall atmosphere. In the Levi's ad, a young man is walking on the pavement and starts delivering Bottom's lines when he encounters a group of Latino and Black American youths, who, by their attitude and clothes, suggest a gang. They recall the "boys" of Luhrmann's film, where the Montagues are visually connoted as white-Americans, the Capulets as Latinos, and Mercutio and the Prince as African Americans.⁴¹



Fig. 2: Urban setting, Levi's 501 advertisement, screen capture, www.youtube.com.



Fig. 3: Riot scene of the Montagues against the Capulets, Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet*, screen capture.

The young man's voice-over says: "I see their knavery, this is to make an ass of me" (min. 0:06 of the advertisement, which corresponds to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 3.1.85);⁴² he then encounters the gang, some of whose members are leaning on a wall. When the young man/Bottom passes by, one of them goes towards him and says: "O Bottom" (0:09, 3.1.82). Bottom then speaks to the camera, apparently unheard by the others: he seems to completely detach himself from the scene he is in and to speak directly to the audience. During this very short shot only the audience feels addressed directly, with Bottom apparently looking into their eyes. Bottom says "to frighten me if they could" (0:11, 3.1.85). The gang member continues speaking Snout's lines: "thou art changed, what do I see on thee?"

⁴¹ The racial connotation of the characters resonates with *West Side Story*, in which Tony's group is formed by white Americans while his beloved Maria's family is of Puerto Rican origins.

⁴² All quotations from the play are taken from this edition: William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in *William Shakespeare, Complete Works*, ed. by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2007), 365-412.

(0:13, 3.1.82) in an aggressive tone, as if in order to start a fight. Bottom's voice-over then exclaims: "but I will not stir from this place" (0:15, 3.1.85), while Bottom directly replies: "What do you see? You see an ass head of your own, do you?" (0:17, 3.1.83) and then moves away from them, his voice-over declaring: "I will walk up and down here, and I will sing" (0:24, 3.1.86-87). The atmosphere of the encounter, which in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was between friends, and in which Snout was afraid of and for Bottom, is completely reversed visually and Bottom seems the one who is menaced by the gang. The climate is one of tension and suspense, and the words of both are given a gravity that is absent from the comic original.

The different racial identity of the two protagonists of the advertisement – Bottom (Joshua Alba) is Latino, while Titania (Amanda Sudano, Donna Summer's daughter) is African American – and the hostility of the gang towards Bottom seem to be hinting at a divide between the two, and some sort of danger is felt looming on their relationship, similarly to the one characterising Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*'s love.

The *Levi's* encounter, ostensibly evoking that between Bottom and Titania, seems to take place between a modern *Romeo and Juliet*, who are speaking of love in a most solemn way after Bottom/Romeo has been threatened by the other mechanicals, who, in this case, are portrayed as an adversary gang, although they speak their original Shakespearean lines. However faithful to Shakespeare's words, the advertisement transforms the original comic mechanicals' scene into a dark romance scene that starts with a potential fight, and where the male character seems to be in danger the whole time. The love of the advertisement becomes more romantic and turbulent in contrast to that from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where the scene of the drug-induced love of the queen of the fairies for an ass-head creature was devised to generate laughter and derision, albeit with a potentially dark undercurrent.

While the setting and the characterisation of the gang are very close to the film *Romeo+Juliet*, the similarity between Luhrmann's *Romeo* (Leonardo DiCaprio) and the advertisement's Bottom, is more subtle, but it still helps delineate the parallel between the two adaptations. The *Levi's 501* Bottom is a young and handsome man, not the low, half-animal creature of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, so different from Titania that Oberon uses him to humiliate her. A similarity with variance can be observed in the protagonist's clothes. The *Levi's 501* clothes seem to be dark versions of some of the light and bright ones worn by *Romeo and Juliet* in Luhrmann's film. Alba and DiCaprio are wearing similar clothes: a shirt and jeans. His appearance, his clothes, the constant menace of the gang, and his courage in defying them, render Bottom more similar to his Baz-Luhrmann parallel than to his Shakespearean homonym. The black top Titania wears seems a dark version of the top of the white dress *Juliet* (Claire Danes) is most often seen wearing. Obviously, Titania is wearing jeans, as is the case with *Juliet* in the scene before her marriage with *Romeo*, which draws her near to the idea of a contemporary young woman portrayed in both film and advertisement. The hairstyle chosen for Titania in the ad recalls that of *Juliet* too.

Levi's Titania is a young and beautiful waitress, who does not possess any of the magical attributes of her namesake. She interrupts her work when she hears Bottom speak and asks: "What angel wakes me from my flowery bed?" (0:28, 3.1.92). Bottom/Alba, who is still walking alone, goes on with: "that they shall see I'm not afraid" (0:30, 3.1.87) at which Titania/Sudano responds "I pray thee gentle mortal sing again" (0:34, 3.1.99). Bottom/Alba turns, he sees her, and she says "mine ear is much enamour'd of thy note" (0:38, 3.1.100). The frame enlarges to show her from a high angle going towards Bottom/Alba as he goes towards her and say, "so is mine eye enthralled to thy shape" (0:42, 3.1.101). Then, a close shot frames the jeans, the two look at them and then at each other in the eyes, and Titania says: "I love thee" (0:48, 3.1.103). The last images show the two lovers staring at each other while the frame enlarges and distances from them till reaching a final overhead shot of the two and of the building and pavement on which they are standing. The advertisement is accompanied by the overture from

Mendelssohn's *Ein Sommernachtstraum* (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*) (1842). This musical choice contributes to the creation of a dreamy atmosphere for the scene and helps to lead to the final moment of meeting and recognition between the two protagonists. The witty citation inserted by the advertisers stimulates the pleasure of recognition in people aware of the musical reference, and opens the ad to another series of intertextual connections with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* not directly referring to Shakespeare's play itself. At the same time, an audience less aware of this citation would only grasp the refined nature of the music which seems particularly apt to portray this meeting between two lovers.

All these additions and 'discontinuities' bring the advertising representation closer to the atmosphere of *Romeo and Juliet*. In the Levi's advertisement, Bottom/Alba defies danger to meet his beloved who hears him "sing" and is drawn to him by a mysterious force, as the "star-crossed" Romeo and Juliet were drawn to each other. The first kiss between Romeo and Juliet in Luhrmann's film resonates through the encounter of Bottom and Titania in the advertisement. The position of the two characters standing in front of each other, Romeo left and Juliet right, as Bottom and Titania are positioned in the shot, the camera's movement from far to a close up of their kiss, as well as the characters' appearance – Juliet and Titania/Sudano in particular are both wearing a tank top and their hair half-up – intensify the similarity of the scenes (see Fig. 4 and Fig. 5).



Fig. 4. The couple of lovers, Levi's 501 advertisement, screen capture, www.youtube.com.



Fig. 5. The couple of lovers, Baz Luhrmann's William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet, screen capture.

The connotations of romantic encounter between Bottom and Titania, expunged of any elements of the ridiculous, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, are then attached to the product advertised, and the dialogue becomes centred on the acceptance of Bottom's new "shape", which is what had actually

“enthralled” Titania’s eye. The new shape is not ridiculous for the audience, and it is the same as Titania’s jeans. The two characters, although being different, recognise each other thanks to the shape of their jeans. The product advertised, the jeans, is represented and plays a role in the commercial but its characteristics are not listed; the audience infers them from the discourses and atmosphere of the advertisement. The jeans become a status symbol: the members of the audience are told that with those particular jeans they will be part of the dreamlike world of the advertisement. In the Levi’s advertisement, traditional advertising practices intersect with strategies that succeed in conveying to the audience a scene from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In this case, however, the references to and appropriation of Luhrmann’s *Romeo+Juliet* superimpose a further message on the advertisement.

The advertisement might thus entail different types of reception: the audience less acquainted with Shakespeare will only assume it to be a version of one Shakespearean play – *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* – from the opening title which states it clearly. This recognition creates a dreamlike and refined atmosphere for the product advertised, enhanced by the music opening the scene and by the reference to the dream in the title of the play. The reproduction of some of Shakespeare’s lines, furthermore, gives a poetic air to the dialogues. The main purpose of the advertisement – namely that of attracting the audience’s attention with an appealing story in order to prompt the purchase of the jeans by connecting it with specific concepts (dream, love and belonging) – is fulfilled even in the case of an audience unaware of all the Shakespearean connections present in the advertisement. An additional layer of familiarity with *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, on the other hand, will entail the reaction of the audience whose wit will be stimulated by the genre reversal and by the wordplay and creative reinterpretation of the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* dialogue, instrumental for the advertisement. Further layers of reception are created through the references to *Romeo and Juliet* mediated through the adaptations of Luhrmann and *West Side Story*. In all cases, the product advertised, the jeans, is given a meaning through the Shakespearean intertexts and related atmospheres of the advertisement. The scenario created by the advertisers projects on to the object a series of attributes, which are more linked with the sensitivity of the audience than with tangible traits.

Far from being a mere exercise in style – although a complex and intertextually dense one – the use of these Shakespearean intertexts and the alteration of their referents go beyond the connection with Shakespeare’s most famous love story. Shakespeare’s words are adapted to the product advertised, the advertisement effectively playing on the word “shape”, the leitmotiv of the advertisement, which is indeed promoting a new pair of jeans “with anti-fit”, as the written words appearing under the brand and model number specify in the last shot. The advertisement also puns on the name of the character Bottom, which hints at the lower part of the body on which the jeans are worn, as well as quoting the line “I see their knavery, this is to make an ass of me”, which entails a pun on the word “ass” and is heard just after a shot of the actor’s jeans-clad “bottom”. In this case, the identification of the Shakespearean material by the audience will increase the effectiveness of the communication. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Bottom is unaware of the transformation of his head into that of an ass, and his friends react when they see his shape has changed. The advertisement shifts this meaning: the gestures – the gangster/Snout yanks the young man’s jeans – and the intonation of the actor uttering the lines: “O Bottom, thou art changed! What do I see on thee?” (3.1.82) denote a different referent for the words, namely, the jeans.

In the Shakespearean dialogue, the queen of the fairies is under a spell obliging her to fall in love with the first creature she sees upon waking; the spell makes her blind to Bottom’s deformity, so much so that her eye is “enthralled to ... [his] shape” (3.1.101). In the original play, the line was intended to make fun of the queen’s debasement and of the incongruity of the monstrously transformed Bottom being praised for his shape by a queen. In the advertisement, the young woman speaks Titania’s lines, but these are not addressed to an animal-like creature as part of Oberon’s trick. Shakespeare’s words here are taken literally, and no comic nuance is attached to them; the words maintain their literal meaning

since the young woman – this time not a queen but a waitress – is genuinely attracted by the young man, thanks to the new shape of his jeans, the same model she is wearing.

The advertisement is not only selling a commodity but a set of impressions which will be attached to the product in the moment of the purchase first, and afterwards in the moment of wearing the jeans. Only by wearing the jeans the spectator will be part of that community of people who think alike and will recognise and be recognised by them as happens in the advertisement. The urban setting and the portrayal of modern-day people helps the identification of the spectators with the people in the ad and implies that everyone could live such a marvellous adventure and be a Shakespearean character. The aim of the advertisement is to establish a relationship of complicity with the audience⁴³ (in this case further enhanced by the puns), often promoting a process of identification⁴⁴ through the representation of the real world of the audience. The use of Shakespeare's words in a contemporary setting demonstrates the appeal his works still have on contemporary audiences and their almost universal capacity to signify. It also testifies to the potential of popular culture to continually rework them and use them to convey newer significations and interpretations.

Knowingly or not, the advertisement also points to the links between the two plays *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, thus adding a further intertextual level of interpretation to the advertising message. The intertwining in the Levi's advertisement of references to and suggestions from both *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* implicitly points to the common critical perspective that the two plays "share some common ground.... The word diptych has been applied to them ..., as if they formed different sides of the same coin".⁴⁵ Both plays present the same dilemma with different outcomes. As Rene Weis reflects, "as in *Romeo and Juliet*, so [in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*] too a young woman, Hermia, refuses to marry the man chosen for her by her father. The penalty, if she persists, is either the frigid virginal life of a nun, or death".⁴⁶

The Levi's commercial thus underlines, with a change of genre, both the potential presence of comedy in *Romeo and Juliet* and of traces of tragedy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Levi's commercial romanticises as well as making more sombre – the threatening gang is just a block away from the couple – the tone of an otherwise comic encounter of an ass-head mechanical with a fairy queen. At the same time, these aspects mirror a similar potential direction towards tragedy observable in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the flight of the daughter to the Athenian woods could have ended in tragedy but ultimately resolves in a comedic ending. Another trait the two plays have in common is the portrayal of youthful rebelliousness and the freedom as well as the dangers it entails. The advertisement represents a condensation of this theme by making the Titania figure a Juliet figure and the Bottom figure a Romeo figure.

4. Conclusion

The Levi's 501 advertisement elicits and exploits various Shakespearean intertextual references that render the work a rich palimpsest. It consciously evokes in its adaptive process the presence of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in order to create particular effects, leading the audience to recognise Shakespeare and the advertisement's deliberate playing with and adaptation of the source. At the same time, the new work establishes a relation with the source that goes beyond the mere enlisting of recursive elements and instead brings new dimensions to the two plays invoked.

⁴³ Pasquale Barbella, "Shakespeare in Spot", in Mariacristina Cavecchi and Sara Soncini, eds., *Shakespeare Graffiti: Il Cigno di Avon nella Cultura di Massa* (Milan: CUEM, 2002), 79-84, 82.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. by René Weis, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 41.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 27.

Traditional adaptive practices – the use of the Shakespearean text, the reproduction of a setting, costumes and characters inspired by Baz Luhrmann's film – intertwine with advertising strategies – the focus on the jeans and on the word shape – in the *Levi's* advertisement. Although the advertisement's aim is to sell the jeans, it succeeds at the same time in conveying and transforming for the audience a scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as well as calling to their mind atmospheres connected to *Romeo and Juliet* mediated via popular film. In this sense, a series of layers of interpretations are superimposed onto the adaptation of Scene 3.1 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

At the moment of reception, the audience may identify some or all of the intertextual references present in the advertisement. At the same time, the recognition of a particular play or scene will be the lens through which they comprehend and appreciate the advertising message. An audience familiar with the Shakespearean material will also be able to detect both continuity and experimentation. The audience's recognition of the Shakespearean intertexts and the frames of interpretation they employ to decode the advertising message are of particular interest since on this depends whether an adaptive passage has taken place. As Hutcheon observes: "in the end, it is the audience who must experience the adaptation as an adaptation".⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Hutcheon and O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 172.