

## How Comics Help to Teach Shakespeare in Schools

Amy Louise Maynard<sup>1</sup>  
The University of Adelaide, Australia

### Abstract

To address the literacy crisis that is currently affecting Britain, and to engage students in English studies in Australia, teachers and educators are turning to graphic novels; specifically, graphic novel adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. Whilst there have been critics of this approach, teaching children about Shakespeare and poetry through comics appears to be successful. There have already been multiple examples of the younger generation becoming familiar with Shakespeare through pop culture, and graphic novels have the advantage in that they have been proven to improve literacy rates. It is a belief of prominent Shakespearean scholars that the works of Shakespeare should not be limited to the elite, as his themes, characters and most importantly, language, is universal, and can be interpreted in many different ways.

### Keywords

Shakespeare, poetry, pop culture, graphic novels, education, reading

Laurence Olivier's film version of *Hamlet* is oft cited as a classic retelling of the Bard's work. However, it didn't find a fan in the form of the young Tom Stoppard. "It bored me shitless," the future screenwriter of *Shakespeare in Love* admitted to *The Times* (Frean 23). Although Stoppard's feelings towards England's greatest poet would (obviously) later change, this anecdote serves as a signal that Shakespearean plays, in the opinion of the younger generation, are often difficult to grasp, considered uncool and boring.

In the same *Times* article, the results of a recent poll conducted by the government for the National Year of Reading revealed that amongst 11-14 year old British school children, the most popular recreational reading matter were the magazines *Heat* and *Bliss*. The least popular was any reading material considered to be homework. Placed second to last were the works of William Shakespeare (Nightingale 12). But in Britain, there isn't just a general disinterest in Shakespeare amongst students. There is also a general disinterest towards reading altogether, especially amongst teenage boys.

---

<sup>1</sup> Amy Louise Maynard holds a Bachelor of Communication and Media Management and an Honours degree in Communication, Media and Culture from the University of South Australia. She is currently writing a PhD thesis on the Australian comic book industry at the University of Adelaide.

In 2008, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development found that 78 per cent of girls were more likely to read for enjoyment, compared with 65 per cent of boys. In the government report “Boys into Books,” written by Dr Chris Brown, boys were also found to be 10 percentage points behind girls at Key Stage Two in English classes at the age of 11 (Freaun 23). In Scotland, a survey conducted by *The Sunday Times* in 2007 revealed that Scotland was in the midst of an educational crisis. In two thirds of schools in Midlothian, Glasgow, East Ayrshire and Clackmannanshire, more than half of secondary school students, by the age of 14, failed to master basic literacy skills.

One of the ways that Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS) has addressed this problem is advising schools to stock graphic novels in their library, “to encourage pupils who are turned off by classic texts to take an interest in literature.” As well as the graphic novel classics *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and *Where the Wind Blows* by Raymond Briggs, there are several novels from the series known as *Manga Shakespeare*, which is currently taking Britain by storm (Allardyce 15).

*Manga Shakespeare*, the brainchild of Shakespearean scholar Richard Appignesi, uses original Shakespearean text in the graphic novels; however, the settings of the stories have been decidedly updated. *Romeo and Juliet* is now not about warring Venetian families, but Yakuza gangsters and rock stars. *Hamlet* has gone cyberpunk. *The Tempest* takes place after an environmental apocalypse has plunged the earth into a second Dark Age (Gravett 10).

The publishing house Classic Comics, who, as their name suggests, update classic literature into graphic novels, have also printed copies of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*. Whilst the historical settings remain the same, the graphic novels do have a unique twist – there are three alternate volumes of text in the one book. The first volume contains the original sonnets and stanzas word-for-word. The second volume contains a slightly altered version of the original, with a word like “thou” replaced with “you,” for example, or “filthy” being used instead of an antiquated word like “reechy.” The third version is even plainer still, with Macbeth’s speech bubbles containing lines such as “I just want to get it OVER with. If only I could KILL him and GET AWAY with it.” Although somewhat amusing in its simplicity, the third version is essential for struggling readers, who can contrast and compare the third version with the second, and when they are confident, compare the second with the first and original version. The illustrations stay the same in all three versions, for continuity purposes (Nightingale 12).

As well as Scotland, accolades for screenplay-to-comic Shakespeare adaptations are coming from England and Australia. Dr Brown describes the *Manga Shakespeare* version of *Macbeth* as perfect for teenage boys and older children (Freaun 23). In Adelaide’s Pedare Christian College, Meghan Cromie has successfully launched a 10 week graphic novel pilot programme, with one of the

core texts being *The Sandman*, by well-known British author Neil Gaiman. In the third volume in *The Sandman* series, *Dream Country*, Gaiman adapts text and themes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As a result, Meghan Cromie, who teaches a class of Year Ten students, reported that when her students were assigned the traditional text of *The Merchant of Venice* after the programme, they responded with enthusiasm (Powers 21).

Australian author Nicki Greenberg has also had success with Shakespeare. Her adaptation of *Hamlet*, which re-imagines the Danish prince and other characters as little inkblots designed to look like lions, was a critical and commercial hit. It won the Children Book Council's Picture Book of the Year Prize in 2011, and is stocked in school libraries and classrooms throughout Australia (Greenberg).

Not everyone has been so enthused about comics being introduced into the school curriculum, however. Nick Seaton, chairperson of Scotland's Campaign for Real Education, is particularly scathing of the format:

This is nonsense. It is just a sop to popular culture. It is about teachers trying to be trendy and won't do anything for raising standards. Youngsters are reading comic books in their spare time of their own volition. This is a waste of school time, depriving youngsters of the study they should be getting. (Allardyce 15)

In Australia, even though her pilot programme proved to be successful, Cromie faced opposition from parents and certain members of the school board, who took offence at the thought of fourteen and fifteen year olds reading what they referred to as picture books. Many teachers are resistant towards graphic novels because they view them as being substandard literature, that take time away from the rigorous study of traditional texts. Therefore, comic books and graphic novels are confined to the area of recreational reading (Powers 21). It is a similar situation in England. Raymond Briggs, when inducted into the Royal Society of Authors, stated that England has always had a "snobby attitude" towards comics (Snowball 18). Chris Brown agrees, regretting the fact that parents did not see comics and graphic novels as "proper books" (Freen 23).

The question must be asked – is it the content, or the format, that makes some parents and educators uncomfortable about these adaptations? To quote journalist Sarah Keating on *Manga Shakespeare*, "depending on your taste, this is a Manga-style mutilation of classical literature, or an exciting new manifestation of the eternal popularity of Shakespeare" (Keating 39). American Shakespearean scholar Marie Plasse, in her essay "Crossover Dreams: Reflections on Shakespeareans and Popular Culture," reveals that she often feels conflicted about her interests in popular culture and her devotion to Shakespeare's poetry:

How could I be a ‘real’ Shakespearean, I wondered, if I was routinely going off to give papers on topics like old rock n’ roll musical films of the 1950s, or the artist then known as Prince? Even as I took pleasure in applying the analytical skills and theatrical interests I developed through my work on Shakespeare to twentieth-century popular musical performances, I worried a lot about the potential effects of my regular runs across the boundary between Shakespearean high culture and American popular culture. I wondered, for example, whether my graduate professors would dismiss me as unserious, given to intellectual ‘slumming’ if they knew what I was doing. (Plasse 13)

John Fiske, author of *Understanding Popular Culture*, defines aesthetic discrimination as that which is enacted by the bourgeoisie and institutionalised by critical industries, particularly that of the arts. What is considered a quality piece of art, what is considered proper aesthetic judgement of a piece of art, simply “universalises the class specificity of its own art forms and cultural tastes” (Fiske 59). That isn’t to say that aesthetic art aren’t considered to be works of great beauty and quality – they are. However, whilst an aesthetic, bourgeois piece of literature will draw praise and attention because of its textual structure, there are now also questions over who decides the meanings that can be drawn from a great piece of art, and what the processes are that one must go through in order to appreciate what is considered “high” art (Bourdieu 29). In contrast, popular culture “is made at the interface between the cultural resources provided by capitalism and everyday life. This identifies relevance as a central criterion” (Fiske 61).

Moreover, what is popular today is not necessarily popular tomorrow. Yesterday was the era of the gramophone, today is the era of the i-Pod. Popular culture thrives on being pertinent to certain sections of the population at certain times, who respond to popular culture in a way that is unique to their position in the social structure. This, Fiske says, is something that could benefit aesthetic culture. Unless a piece of art resonates with the people, it will become irrelevant. Thus, instead of having the elite decide what the most appropriate response to a text is, a text, whether aesthetic or popular, should have a multiplicity of readings, readings produced by people who incorporate their own social and cultural background knowledge into the text (Fiske 61).

According to Richard Keller Simon, it is simply a myth that popular culture is mindless escapism. Although the cultural hegemony has ingrained us to see some texts as “trash” and others as “classics which never fail to enlighten us,” it is possible to read both with the same level of critical scrutiny. That is because the tragedy, the epic, the romance and the farce are not limited to certain pieces of art; they are instead found in multiple forms of media. Besides, when comparing different media formats, such as books, films and TV shows, Simon insists that as long as the pictorial and linguistic signs can be paralleled

between texts, then that is perfectly adequate for critical analysis and study (Simon 2-3).

Plasse agrees that there are certain expectations when studying Shakespeare, that there are “layers of mediation, cultural authority and mystery” to consider when writing about his texts in an institutional setting. But then with the advent of postmodernism, a cultural theory formed in the 1950s which is still relevant today, Plasse wonders how long traditionalist scholars can continue to ignore the fact that when Shakespeare was, and is, scrutinised under the lens of feminist, psycho-analytical, Marxist and queer-theorist schools of thought, it leads to innovative scholarship not only in the field of Shakespearean studies, but also in the field of cultural studies. These new approaches to Shakespeare raise issues about textuality, identity, authorship and the politics of the classical history canon. These new ways of interpreting Shakespeare were also ways in which Plasse analysed pop culture, and as a result, she saw an immediate overlap:

... the incontrovertible historical and cultural differences that had always separated us from Shakespeare, now urgently brought into sharper focus by new historical and cultural materialist scholarship, which insisted that we make a stronger, more theoretically sophisticated efforts to contextualise Shakespeare’s work, and that we do so with full awareness of the ramifications of our own cultural and historical positions. (Plasse 14)

Shakespeare may be associated with an elite culture, writes Plasse, but when analysing Shakespeare in a pop cultural context, it can help to ease the added burdens of having to address the inevitable differences that exist between a reader in the twenty first century and a man creating works that date back to the Elizabethan age. There is also the problem that when viewing a performance of Shakespeare’s work, it is always a modern production. Plasse describes scholars feeling frustrated in that they will never be able to witness an Elizabethan Shakespeare performance. Instead, there are only Shakespeare’s plays and poetry that are left behind, and the various interpretations that have been made from those texts over the years, on the stage, screen and page (Plasse 14).

There is no end to the interpretations of The Bard. Benedict Nightingale reports that there have been over 250 adaptations of Shakespeare on television over the years alone. Whilst performances at the Globe Theatre still attract a large audience, it is unique in that half of its audience is under the age of 34. Other traditional Shakespearean theatrical performances are noticing a decline in audience attendance, especially amongst the young. Even the prestigious Royal Shakespeare Company’s season of “complete works” in 2006-07 only

managed to sell 53, 000 of its 527, 000 tickets to those under the age of 25 (Nightingale 12).

Robert Moscaliuc believes that Shakespeare is still relevant to younger generations; they are just learning of his plays' themes, quotes, characters, plots and settings through pop cultural adaptations. The poet himself is also synonymous with great literature, and Moscaliuc claims that the term Shakespearean is a brand, the same way we could call Coca-Cola a brand. Just as Andy Warhol announced that Coca-Cola was a symbol of democracy, as anyone from the President of the United States to the bum on the sidewalk could drink and enjoy a Coca-Cola, Shakespeare has become something for everyone. His influence has permeated the world of literature for hundreds of years. Moscaliuc elaborates on how the poetry of Shakespeare lives on through the ages, in the form of inspiration, adaptation and colloquialisms:

Familiarity with his works does indeed allow an enhanced understanding of the music of the great composers such as Mendelssohn, of paintings by Blake, of modern novels such as Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, of the thousands of film and television sitcoms that make allusions to Shakespeare, and of references to him by politicians and journalists, preachers and comedians. He is a permanent presence in our daily speech: almost all and sundry use expressions such as 'flaming youth,' 'to the manner born,' 'hoist with his own petard,' 'star-crossed lovers' and many more.... The Bard of Avon is nowadays a fruitful spring of entertainment and wit that can be used in everything, be it advertising, commercials, Sunday evening shows or low budget films. (Moscaliuc 4)

Rather than corrupting Shakespeare, Shakespeare being used as an inspiration for various other works of art simply serves to enrich his original plays. It shows how diverse they were in terms of storyline; how human and fallible his characters were, and how the language used in his sonnets was at once elaborate and evocative. Rather than being resistant to transformation, Shakespeare's works respond to it. In the words of Moscaliuc, "Shakespeare is one and many, formed but still forming" (Moscaliuc 6).

However, Plasse still has sympathy for those who are confused by the so-called "culture wars" of recent years. After all, parents concerned about their children getting a proper education and understanding Shakespearean text in its pure form might be anxious about what constitutes high art and low art in the world of cultural theory. The scholar essentially acts as a transmitter of ideas, and when dealing with a giant in the literary field such as Shakespeare, it may appear as though scholars are "abandoning their post," and "succumbing to the mindless consumerism of mass culture." But Plasse calls for more Shakespeareans to complement their study of the Bard with studies on popular culture:

My own experiences studying popular culture suggests to me that such work is productive for Shakespeareans, and not just because it opens up a space in which we might escape or rebel or satisfy unmet theatrical desires. Engagement with popular culture is also productive for us precisely because it prompts us to reflect in new ways on the frustrations, opportunities, and meanings of our commitment to our primary field of study. (Plasse 14)

Therefore, if students are growing up with Shakespeare all around them, then what is it in particular that makes the graphic novel and manga comic book so engaging?

Comics and graphic novels are swiftly becoming a new force to be reckoned with in the literary world. Claire Snowball in *Graphic Novels: Telling Tales Visually* reports that many universities include comics in their various studies of literacy and the fine arts. The University of Florida hosts an annual Conference on Comics and Graphic Novels. In 2006, it was reported that whilst the rest of the hardcopy publishing industries found themselves struggling to combat declining sales because of the rise of online publishing, sales of hardcopy comics and manga actually increased (Snowball, "Graphic Novels: Telling Tales Visually" 18).

Comics scholar Paul Gravett says that whilst manga comics have been used as a source of both entertainment and education for years in Asia, the Japanese-style of comic has recently begun to achieve popularity in Britain, particularly amongst children, teenagers and young adults. They grow up with manga through Pokemon cards, anime cartoons and Japanese animated films such as *Spirited Away*. British illustrators are also beginning to experiment with manga, with Emma Vieceli and Sonia Leong illustrating *Manga Shakespeare*, published by British company SelfMadeHero. One of the definite advantages about publishing Shakespeare in the form of manga, says Gravett, is how "vividly manga techniques and pacing can convey motion and emotion" (Gravett 10). Melanie Gibson, a senior lecturer in childhood studies at Northumbria University and comic enthusiast, also praises manga because of its "cool" factor. Gibson has observed that if children are reading something that is seen as trendy by their peers, it gives them a confidence boost. This is essential if the child reading manga is a struggling reader (Allardyce 15).

*Manga Shakespeare* has proved not only popular in Britain (where the titles had to be reprinted six months after the series launched), but also in Japan. Many universities and schools there are requesting copies, fulfilling SelfMadeHero's goal to have as many people read Shakespeare as possible (Gravett 10).

Pam Macintyre, a lecturer in Language and Literacy at the University of Melbourne, believes that it is no coincidence that children have an affinity with comics and graphic novels, because they are growing up in a world that is saturated with visual images. Advertisements and magazines are more prevalent than ever, and the digital revolution means that there are generations of people being able to process information presented in the form of multiple images juxtaposed with text very quickly. And, if they are faced with large blocks of text that are difficult to understand, they become unengaged, and move on. Dianne Laycock, a teacher and librarian at Sydney's Barker College, advocates graphic novels because they "cater to a wide array of learning styles and abilities." For example, when her year 8 class studied *Manga Shakespeare's Macbeth*, the students that had trouble understanding the traditional text began to enjoy the story more when they could see the characters interact with each other and the action play out. For those with advanced literary skills, they compared the original text with the manga comic and were asked to evaluate the adaptation process (Powers 21).

According to Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner, the ability to process visual information is linked to spatial intelligence. Students who have low levels of spatial intelligence have difficulty forming mental images in their head, and so when they read a plain piece of text, they struggle to follow the narrative because they can't link the words to their imagination (Snowball, "Graphic Novels: Telling Tales Visually" 20). Graphic novels and comics, with their sequential panels containing images combined with text, can help these students. But they are much more than picture books. Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher, authors of "Using Graphic Novels, Anime and the Internet in an Urban High School," explain that graphic novels can enhance critical literacy skills, as authors often use panels that contain only visuals. Frey and Fisher advocate teachers engaging students in discussions as to how the authors of the graphic novel (by authors I mean both the writer and the artist), use images to demonstrate literary concepts (Bylsma).

Wolfgang Bylsma, an Australian comics scholar, firmly believes that graphic novels encourage readers to be actively analysing the text:

Graphic novels require readers to be actively engaged in the process of decoding and comprehending a range of literary devices, including narrative structures, metaphor and symbolism, point of view, and the use of puns and alliteration, intertextuality and inference. (Bylsma)

Roland Barthes, one of the fore-founders of the school of thought known as structuralism, identified two types of literary works – the readerly text, and the writerly text. The readerly text invites the reader to accept a superficial reading of the text, where the meanings are clearly explained by the author, and the



reader becomes passive. A writerly text, meanwhile, is not so undemanding. It challenges the reader to make sense of its various textual constructs and to inscribe their own meanings onto the various layers of subtext (Fiske 65). Whilst comic books and graphic novels are often dismissed as being “the funny papers” or “superhero schtick” (and after the publication of Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*, calling the superhero genre simplistic is becoming less of an honest evaluation and more of a lazy stereotype), there are many comic books and graphic novels that are considered modern masterpieces. Some, like *Fun Home*, are original pieces of work, and others, like *Tamara Drewe*, are based on existing literary classics (Posy Simmonds based *Tamara Drewe* on Thomas Hardy’s *Far From the Madding Crowd*).

But perhaps more importantly, graphic novels are not only educational, but students find them enjoyable. When Snowball surveyed school librarians who had graphic novel collections, they confirmed the hypothesis that graphic novels inspire reluctant readers to participate in recreational reading. Teachers would also recommend graphic novels to students who claimed that they didn’t like to read, regardless of their literary ability.

One of the things that Snowball discovered in her PhD research was that students who claimed to dislike reading, or deliberately tried to avoid reading, didn’t realise that they were reading for recreational purposes when they read magazines, blogs and social networking sites. Both public and school libraries have suffered a decline in attendance rates from teenagers and young people, and so offering graphic novels and magazines as well as traditional texts is becoming a popular option for librarians (Snowball, “Teenagers Talking About Reading and Libraries” 110). Just because a teenager finds one text boring, doesn’t mean that they will be turned off of reading for good. In one of her focus groups, a participating student struggled to stay interested in *Pride and Prejudice* because it was “old-fashioned,” yet began reading the graphic novels that Snowball lent him for the purpose of the study in earnest (Snowball, “Teenagers Talking About Reading and Libraries” 109).

If Michael Boyd, artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company is to be believed, then children finding traditional versions of Shakespeare’s plays dull is nothing new. Boyd, like Tom Stoppard, was almost turned off of Shakespeare for good after an amateur theatre troop performed *The Merchant of Venice* at his primary school. It was only when he saw a cartoon version of *Hamlet* on television did he become enamoured with the Bard, describing the “the oddness of the language” contrasted with the “gothic quality of the drawings” as what drew him in. He also rates highly a comic book version of *Othello* that he discovered in his youth, particularly for an illustration of Desdemona’s handkerchief falling, which serves as a key plot point. “All one’s anxieties about its loss being such a ridiculous coincidence disappeared in that

single, awful, compelling, destiny-loaded frame,” he says. “It was great” (Nightingale 12).

Childhood is the best time to get people into Shakespeare, says Boyd. Jacqui O’Hanlon, the Royal Shakespeare Company’s acting director of education, believes that around the age of seven or eight is the most opportune time. Because at that age, “they take a delight in learning unusual language, because nobody has told them how hard it is.” Boyd cites his own seven year old daughter as an example, recalling how she likes to incorporate Shakespearean expressions into her conversations in the playground. This in turn makes her friends curious about how she learnt certain words and phrases (Nightingale 12).

For Moscaluic, there needs to be a return to Shakespeare as a text that is enjoyed by all classes of people, in whatever form, as long as his original text (or at least passages of his original text) is kept intact. For even though adaptations of his work keeps his narratives, themes and characters culturally relevant, if his language is not heard or read regularly then his poetry is at the risk of being historicised. Moscaluic uses the example of the Victorian era, when Shakespeare’s plays were not only performed for the upper classes in West End theatres, but also for the lower classes in rundown theatres. Even though the performances would undoubtedly vary in quality, the language remained the same. Whilst the upper classes, the educated people of England, could undoubtedly understand the specific subtexts of some statements, or could appreciate the verbosity of his soliloquies, the lower classes still appreciated his plays as a whole. Shakespeare was a form of entertainment, and the plays performed for and by the poor in the East End often incorporated other forms of popular entertainment of the day, such as dancing, jigs and interludes where bawdy songs were sung. The people who watched his plays at the opposite spectrum of the West End could appreciate Shakespeare’s ribald humour, empathise with his tragedies and identify with characters such as the fool Flagstaff, the merchant Shylock and the plucky Viola.

At the end of the nineteenth century, these performances of Shakespeare were deemed by the bourgeoisie to be barbaric, as they were seen to be mocking his masterpieces. Thus, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Shakespeare began to be classified only as something to be *truly* appreciated by the intellectual elite. However, the appeal of Shakespeare’s works to multiple groups in society meant that Shakespeare could not stay as something simply stuffy and aesthetic for long, and he and his works were soon absorbed into popular culture. This process, in which Shakespeare was claimed by the masses, then restricted to study by the elite, and is now slowly becoming relevant again to multiple sections of society, is called by Moscaluic “unconscious levelling.” Unconscious levelling is the process in which Shakespeare is now not the master but the muse, where the proletariat, infuriated that they are not deemed by high society

to be worthy of Shakespeare, instead of putting him on a pedestal, pull him down to their level. *The Taming of the Shrew* becomes *Ten Things I Hate About You*, and *Hamlet* inspires *The Lion King*. In a nodding wink to the idea of Shakespearean plays being only performed by “the elite,” a scene in the comedy *Billy Madison* shows the idiot title character prancing about the stage in full Elizabethan garb, reciting Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” speech in a terrible English accent.

Although these works have allowed Shakespeare to reach diverse audiences around the world, Moscaluic is concerned that what made Shakespeare so revolutionary in the first place – his poetry – can sometimes be lost in modern adaptations. Without the language, Shakespeare can be enjoyed, but he cannot truly be appreciated, by pop culture enthusiasts and aesthetics alike:

The quest of providing Shakespeare is of course a notable quest and deserves our full reverence, but it also implies a risk if the original text is absent in the process of reading/understanding. These types of rewriting involve a transaction between an ancient text and a modern agenda. The risk is that very often it is the contemporary issue that seems more important, as the plays are refocused towards modern issues. Through this sort of ‘translation’ of meaning an important part of Shakespeare is lost, namely the immortal part. Shakespeare is first of all famous for his vocabulary and his peculiar way of combining words with powerful imagery in a constellation of marvellous metaphors. One may easily notice that the translated piece is a reduction of the very beauty of language that Shakespeare used in his works. Because of this reduction, the figure of The Bard loses its peculiar aspects and becomes a part of the ordinary. (Moscaluic 10)

Just as there are adaptations that keep Shakespeare’s narratives and characterisations but cut his language, so are there modern adaptations that keep the original text intact. These latter adaptations include Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet*, Ralph Fiennes’s directorial debut *Coriolanus* and *Manga Shakespeare*. In conjunction with the 2012 summer Olympics in England there was the Cultural Olympiad, where British artistic talents on display included the historical, in the form of Jane Austen, the contemporary, in the form of Damien Hirst, and looming above them all, the Bard.

Not only England’s foremost famous poet, 2012 also marked the bicentennial of Shakespeare’s plays first being performed. The Cultural Olympiad not only celebrated Shakespeare as a symbol of English ingenuity, but it also functioned as an invitation for other cultures to show how Shakespeare has enriched their arts. The World Shakespeare Festival featured more than 50 international arts organisations producing works that have been adapted from

or inspired by Shakespeare, with highlights including the Iraqi Theatre Company's first ever Shakespearean production, and Brazil's Companhia BufoMechanica, which fused traditional theatre with multimedia and dance (Nayeri).

The Royal Shakespeare Company, under the innovative direction of Michael Boyd (who was also the organiser of the World Shakespeare Festival), launched an initiative called Open Stages for the Cultural Olympiad, where amateur dramatists were invited to perform Shakespeare's plays in Stratford-Upon-Avon. Over 250 amateur productions were performed in May 2012, prior to the Olympic Games in London. It is Boyd's philosophy that there should be a denouncing of the myth that only the cultured elite can appreciate watching and/or reading Shakespeare, and that actors of all skills should have the opportunity to bring Shakespeare to life, echoing the Victorian era when Shakespearean productions were more egalitarian. Just as Plasse and Fiske explained that popular culture blended with aesthetic culture produces new, creative hybrid forms of expression, a troupe from Milton Keynes will be performing an all-female, feminist version of *Hamlet*, and a Huddersfield troupe will be putting a sci-fi spin on *Twelfth Night* (Thorpe 14).

William Shakespeare's influence on English poetry, and poetry in general, is unparalleled. His works are still considered relevant, but the question now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is relevant to whom? He is relevant to literary scholars, to the upper class and to the highly educated, but if he is not relevant to the majority, then why is this so? Shakespeare's very roots belong in being accessible to everyone, with his original productions in the Globe Theatre drawing patrons such as the humble peasant, who would rub shoulders with wealthy aristocrat ("Shakespeare's Globe Theatre"). However, in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Shakespeare became a commodity only for those with cultural and educational capital, and only Shakespeare's verse in its purest form was accepted.

In the advent of postmodernism, and, with interest in Shakespeare waning in children and teenagers, who see his works as stiff, intimidating and dull, there needed to be a way to make Shakespeare more palatable to more people, and it came in the form of blending Shakespeare, considered to be high culture, with popular culture, which appeals to different groups in society because it is ever changing. Shakespeare became a feminist icon thanks to his female heroes such as Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*, an emblem of racial and ethnic equality as the characters of Shylock and Othello were painted in a sympathetic light, and, with multiple instances of cross-dressing in his plays, a queer activist.

It is not only Shakespeare's characters that have proved to be everlasting, but also his narratives and themes. The sheer diversity of his works in terms of genre is astounding – the tragedy, the comedy, the romance, the political drama.

Sometimes a play could be a combination of two genres, perhaps three, owing to his frequent use of subplots. The plots of his plays are so rich in detail that they have been adapted into multiple forms of media.

But what is essential to appreciating and enjoying Shakespeare is of course being able to read or hear his poetic verse. One can not only make more sense of his stories and be able to understand the motivations behind his characters, but also be in awe of what mastery he had over the English language. What would the English language even be like without the poetry of Shakespeare?

Whether Shakespeare's plays and poetry are adapted into books, films, or television shows should not matter, what *should* matter is that his texts are reaching an audience. *Manga Shakespeare*, *The Sandman*, Classic Comics' *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*, and Nicki Greenburg's *Hamlet* are clearly reaching a younger audience, in the form of comic books and graphic novels.

Whilst comic books and graphic novels have been disparaged as an art form in the past, there has been a renewed attention in comics because of its ability to help those who struggle with reading. It has the ability to do this because the narratives conveyed through its sequential panels are made up of images juxtaposed with text. Those with low spatial intelligence are able to piece together the story as the images are already formed.

Graphic novels and comics are also praised for the wide variety of genres they encompass. Whilst formerly just believed to tell stories involving one-dimensional superheroes or be filled with slapstick comedy, now comics offer a range of reading material. Manga is proving to be a popular genre, and children and teenagers in Britain and Australia are regularly purchasing manga comics, or borrowing them from libraries. Combining Shakespeare with manga is a perfect fit. Even better, Shakespeare's settings and characters are updated so that the contexts are more relatable. The genre of fantasy is always popular, and Australia has had great success with *The Sandman* and Greenburg's whimsical take on *Hamlet*. The titles by Classic Comics may alter Shakespeare's texts in two versions; however, they still keep the original text, so that when readers are confident they can attempt to make sense of Shakespeare's archaic language.

Educating and entertaining children with Shakespeare adapted into comic books seems to be a resounding success, with glowing appraisals from the majority of teachers, education professionals and librarians in Britain and in Australia. But most importantly, children are starting to take an interest in Shakespeare, ensuring that his legacy will live on. To quote Ben, an eight year old school boy from Devon, "My dad said Shakespeare is boring, but he's got it wrong. I'm going to tell him about *Hamlet*. It's got murders and ghosts and castles, and that's not boring" (Nightingale 12). I'm sure that Tom Stoppard, and thousands of other children and adults worldwide, would agree.

## Works Cited

- Allardyce, Jason. "Schools to Use Comics for Teaching Aids." *The Sunday Times* 20 May 2007: 15.
- Bylsma, Wolfgang. "Graphic Novels in the Classroom: An Overview." 5 Sept. 2012. [www.learningdiversity.org](http://www.learningdiversity.org).
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of The Judgement of Taste*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Fiske, John. *Understanding Popular Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Frean, Alexandra. "Comic Books Can Get Boys Into the Habit of Reading." *The Times* 14 June 2008: 23.
- Gravett, Paul. "Manga Ain't What They Used to Be." *The Times* 13 Oct. 2007: 10.
- Greenberg, Nicki. "Shakespeare's Hamlet: Staged on the Page by Nicki Greenberg." 12 March 2010. [www.nickigreenberg.com](http://www.nickigreenberg.com).
- Keating, Sarah. "A Comic Treatment for the Bard." *Irish Times* 6 Jan. 2010: 39.
- Moscaliuc, Robert. *Everybody's Shakespeare*. Nebraska: U of Nebraska Press, 1994.
- Nayeri, Farah. "London Launches Olympic-Year Arts Bonanza." 16 January 2011. [www.charlotteobserver.com](http://www.charlotteobserver.com).
- Nightingale, Benedict. "The Bard – As They Like It." *The Times* 14 April 2008: 12.
- Plasse, Marie A. "Crossover Dreams: Reflections on Shakespearians and Popular Culture." *College Literature* 31.4 (2004): 12-14.
- Powers, Liza. "Graphic Tales Make Novel Teaching Tools." *The Sunday Age* 21 Sept. 2008: 21.
- "Shakespeare's Globe Theatre." Web. 29 December 2012. [www.enotes.com/Shakespeare](http://www.enotes.com/Shakespeare).
- Simon, Richard Keller. *Trash Culture*. California: U of California Press, 1999.
- Snowball, Clare. "Graphic Novels: Telling Tales Visually." *Synergy* 4.2 (2006): 18-22.
- Snowball, Clare. "Teenagers Talking About Reading and Libraries." *Australian Academic and Research Libraries* 39.2 (2008): 106-18.
- Thorpe, Vanessa. "RSC Grants Amateur Dramatics Starring Role in the Cultural Olympiad." *The Guardian* 8 Jan. 2012: 14.