

THE EDUCATIONAL VISUAL “LANGUAGE” IN GRAPHIC NOVEL ADAPTATIONS OF
SHAKESPEARE

by

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ABSTRACT

There is a hierarchal problem in how Shakespearean graphic novels are taught within secondary level education. As will be shown in my review of the critical work surrounding Shakespearean graphic novel adaptations, graphic texts have long helped instructors, teachers, and other fellow educators, deconstruct and challenge how we view Shakespeare and the language of his plays. The graphic novels I have chosen for my study (Manga Classics *Hamlet*, Ian Doescher's *Deadpool Does Shakespeare*, Chuck Austen's *She Lies With Angels*, and Ronald Wimberly's *Prince of Cats*) have been selected not because they exemplify the "best" adapted graphic novels of Shakespeare, but rather because they pose interesting questions, theories, and models of delivery of the original texts of Shakespeare. Showcasing the Shakespearean "rhizomatic" theory posed by Douglas Lanier, these graphic novels are very different from one another in how they reconnect the reader (and "viewer") to the early modern past and language of Shakespeare's dramatic texts. While all of them respect the so-called "original text," there is an obvious line of tension between how they embrace, incorporate, or deviate from Shakespeare. These differences range from revolutionary, in bringing new purpose to adaptation theory surrounding Shakespeare, to the acknowledgement that Shakespeare's Elizabethan English can be modified, changed, and "paraphrased" and still remain "Shakespeare." Therefore, my thesis will ultimately prove that Shakespeare, the poet as well as the idea, is not limited to a

“language,” but can also be seen and studied in images, graphic artwork, and the skilled linework of a graphic novel. In recognizing that Shakespeare’s language is not simply a textual entity, but also a visual cultural text, I hope to show that secondary education level students can not only learn to interpret the original language of Shakespeare but come to recognize the importance of his graphic imprint.

DEDICATION

For my mom who taught me how to read and write while she was writing her own English master's thesis; for Megha who has given me her heart, her ear, her TV, and her mom's cooking for the past two years; for the illustrators, writers, colorists, and letterers who poured their lifeblood into a comic book so that we could enjoy it; and for every struggling high school "nerd" who reads comic books to get by – this is for you.

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Finally, a purr-ful thanks to my kitties, Bruce and Tasha, for saving me from an unprecedented year of pandemic loneliness, away from family, friends, and companions. I promise, after this is over, I won't spend so much time on the computer and you won't have to keep laying on my keyboard to get my attention.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis sets out not only to investigate the “idea” of graphic novel adaptations of Shakespeare but also to ask two central questions: 1), How can we utilize graphic novel adaptation of Shakespeare in secondary level education? and 2), How do graphic novel adaptations challenge the primary way we “read” and “listen” to Shakespeare?

The following argument is based on the proposition that there is a hierarchal problem in how Shakespearean graphic novels are taught within secondary level education. As will be shown in my review of the critical work surrounding Shakespearean graphic novel adaptations, these graphic texts have long helped instructors, teachers, and other fellow educators, deconstruct and challenge how we view Shakespeare and the language of his plays. The graphic novels I have chosen for my study have been selected not because they exemplify the “best” adapted graphic novels of Shakespeare, but rather because they pose interesting questions, theories, and models of delivery of the original texts of Shakespeare. Showcasing the Shakespearean “rhizomatic” theory posed by Douglas Lanier, these graphic novels are very different from one another in how they reconnect the reader (and “viewer”) to the early modern past and language of Shakespeare’s dramatic texts. While all of them respect the so-called “original text,” there is an obvious line of tension between how they embrace, incorporate, or deviate from Shakespeare. These differences range from revolutionary, in bringing new purpose

to adaptation theory surrounding Shakespeare, to the acknowledgement that Shakespeare's Elizabethan English can be modified, changed, and "paraphrased" and still remain "Shakespeare." Therefore, my thesis will ultimately prove that Shakespeare, the poet as well as the idea, is not limited to a "language," but can also be seen and studied in images, graphic artwork, and the penciled lines of a graphic novel. In recognizing that Shakespeare's language is not simply a textual entity, but also a visual cultural text, I hope to show that secondary education level students can not only learn to interpret the original language of Shakespeare but come to recognize the importance of his graphic imprint. With that in mind, the argument that follows is broken into four sections, each covering a graphic text that is adapted, translated, or evolved from Shakespeare's original plays and texts.

In part one, I cover Manga Classics *Hamlet*, adapted and illustrated by Crystal Chan and Julien Choy. As will be shown and proven throughout my argument, Manga Shakespeare texts are undoubtedly the most popular brand of Shakespeare graphic novels. Manga is easy to read, colorful in its depictions of characters, and because of its strident popularity within the United States with series like *Attack on Titan*, *Naruto*, and *Dragon Ball*, it has transitioned into a powerful educational tool within secondary level classrooms. As a result, Manga Shakespeare texts have gained the most critical attention in terms of their role and capability within these classroom settings. That said, Manga Shakespeare companies – like the one I have chosen to consider, Manga Classics – are often noted as being "loyal" or "faithful" to the text in which they are adapting. However, despite Manga's popularity in both the education and publication markets, in its pursuit to show absolute loyalty to the text, it often struggles to challenge the text-to-adaptation hierarchy of Shakespeare in its format. My own example, Manga Classics *Hamlet*,

does not attempt to dissemble or challenge Shakespeare's original meanings, plot, or language, but rather endeavors to demonstrate a one-to-one ratio of original text-to-graphic novel.

From there, I pivot to part two, *Deadpool Does Shakespeare*, written and illustrated by Ian Doescher and Bruno Oliveira, which, as I argue in the following section, gives students the chance for a "new" introduction into Shakespeare's texts. *Deadpool Does Shakespeare*, unlike Manga Classics *Hamlet*, challenges the Bard's original language in bending the capabilities of the iambic pentameter, while also managing to offer a new look at the tropes and motifs of his tragedies. Deadpool, being both a chaotic mercenary and a somewhat liminal character (with the ability to break the fourth wall), manages to poke a lot of fun at the highly academic, structured plots and language of Shakespeare's plays. In doing so, not only does Doescher succeed in making Shakespeare seem less threatening to young readers and viewers of the comic book, but he also showcases how Shakespeare's early modern language can be used in interesting and dynamic ways. Furthermore, if Deadpool's story acts as a "new" way of breaking ground on Shakespeare, *She Lies with Angels*, written and illustrated by Chuck Austen and Salvador Larroca, is a comic book that can be utilized as a point of comparison, a middle ground between the original text of Shakespeare and a "alternative" one, to be read alongside one another. Immersed in the world of Marvel Comics' X-Men, Austen's text is a rendition of *Romeo and Juliet*, but more than that it becomes an opportunity for further exploration into both Shakespeare's world as well as that of the graphic novel. What Austen chooses to adapt, change, and keep, versus what Shakespeare has written into his version of the tragedy becomes a reflexive activity of comparing and contrasting between the two worlds. And in the final step of the graphic novel evolution, *Prince of Cats*, illustrated and written by Ronald Wimberly, offers a subversive, but changed version of *Romeo and Juliet* that combines Shakespearean language,

poetry, and early 1980s Hip Hop to show both the impact, the difference, and the separation from the “original” text of Shakespeare. Wimberly’s text, alongside the other two I have chosen, proves that, while Shakespeare is immortalized as a cultural icon of our literary history, the ways in which he is reified, changed, and “paraphrased” in graphic novel adaptations are as dynamic, thoughtful, and worth closer study as his early modern texts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Paraphrasing” Shakespeare

“‘You can’t paraphrase Shakespeare, that’s the point. It says what it says and it doesn’t say more or less. And to paraphrase it or modernise it is an absurd exercise in many ways. To explain and to help people understand, yes of course. But you can’t change it.’”¹ This observation, originally transcribed from an interview within Shari Sabeti’s article, “Shakespeare, adaptation and ‘matters of trust’,” comes from an anonymous, but what sounds like a particularly weathered Shakespeare academic within the field. For context, this anonymous academic is answering a question Sabeti asks about graphic novel adaptations challenging the mainstream text of Shakespeare that is often utilized in secondary level classrooms.² This academic, who serves as a supervisor for the Manga Shakespeare company, SelfMadeHero, reviews the newly adapted script before allowing it to be sent off to the graphic artist, who in turn creates the art for the manga edition of that specific play. And when it comes to graphic novel depictions of Shakespeare, this anonymous academic’s anxiety is a common one: graphic novel adaptations – a hybrid of text and image – threaten the grace and centrality of Shakespeare’s “language.” Amy

¹ Shari Sabeti, “Shakespeare, adaptation, and ‘matters of trust,’” in *Cambridge Journal of Education* 47, no. 3 (2017): 337-354. This is an original quote transcribed by Sabeti, 344.

² Sabeti is writing in context to UK standardized English where Shakespeare alternatives through graphic novels are more popular than in the US.

Louise Maynard points out that some academics, such as Robert Moscaliuc,³ fear that “paraphrasing” Shakespeare’s language will threaten “what made Shakespeare so revolutionary in the first place – his poetry – [which will] 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.”⁴ Perhaps this is why many graphic novel adaptations of Shakespeare are designed to play it safe, choosing instead to focus more on the “images” than on “adapting” the language. By and large, this is what the criticism of most graphic novel adaptations chooses to focus on – graphic novel adaptations that are shaped utilizing the unedited language of the play in full-text versions. Sabeti’s own article focuses on SelfMadeHero’s line of manga editions of Shakespeare, which are usually full-text copies of the play, with only slight changes to the text. The other popular brand of graphic novel adaptations that chooses to focus on the “language” is Classical Comics, a UK-based company that takes customized orders based on either full text, abridged text, or an abbreviated text of Shakespeare’s plays. As you can see, neither of these adaptations seem particularly willing to “paraphrase” Shakespeare’s language, especially when it comes to his dramatic works.

With that in mind, I begin with this anonymous academic not because I intend to appear divisive over “paraphrasing” Shakespeare, or because I mean to generalize this academic’s attitude towards the entire field, but as an indicator of the presumed unmalleable nature of Shakespeare’s “language” when it comes to graphic novel adaptations. Not only have Shakespeare’s dramatic works been long thought of as a paragon comprised of the single-handedly greatest pieces of literature in the English canon, his use of language is often thought of

³ Amy Louise Maynard, “How Comics Help to Teach Shakespeare in Schools,” in *Asiatic* 6, no. 2 (December 2012): 96-109. Maynard is referring to Robert Moscaliuc, *Everybody’s Shakespeare* (Nebraska: U of Nebraska Press, 1994).

⁴ Maynard, 106.

as a point of “origin” for our own contemporary use of English. Many scholars, students, and passionate fans alike perhaps find themselves as Maynard does when she asks, “What would the English language even be like without the poetry of Shakespeare?”⁵ Maynard and the aforementioned anonymous academic are not wrong to emphasize the importance of Shakespeare’s language and its lasting impact on the very lexicon of our modern speech. That being said, however, Shakespeare’s language, contrary to popular belief, has been changed in the past for both clarity and educational purposes within adaptation.

Nevertheless, it is not surprising that the pull for utilizing graphic literature for the sake of clarification and education has been around for hundreds of years. It was that same idea of utilizing illustration alongside easy-to-read text that encouraged siblings Charles and Mary Lamb to write their well-loved and classic children’s book, *Tales from Shakespeare*. Originally published in 1807, *Tales* marks one of the first adolescent focused adaptations of Shakespeare.⁶ The Lambs’ work set out to “rewrite” many of Shakespeare’s more popular plays in simplified language, which often required gutting some of the more complicated subplots from the plays. As you’ll notice, despite the aforementioned anonymous critic’s fears of “paraphrasing,” the Lambs demonstrate that “paraphrase” can be an effective way to “retell” Shakespeare especially when dealing with a younger audience and readership. Ruling his language to be only “part” of his significance and impact, the Lambs cut Shakespeare’s complicated written word for the sake of keeping the emotional complexity of the main story and characters. This strategy worked as the Lambs’ writing was re-printed multiple times over the course of the 19th Century due to its

⁵ Maynard, 108.

⁶ While I do not have any outstanding documentation, I’m certain enough to imply that Charles and Mary Lamb were not the first to edit Shakespeare for the sake of clarification. Obviously, his writing has been changed for performance purposes long before it was ever changed for education or clarity’s sake. The Lambs’ are merely a couple of the most known “editors” of Shakespeare’s work.

high-volume popularity amongst both children and adults. It would be these colored illustrations of Shakespeare reprinted in an edition by Harrison Morris of the *Tales* that would serve as a contributing factor to the printing of the comics line, Classics Illustrated.⁷ Classics Illustrated, published by the Elliot Publishing Company beginning in 1941, took on over 160 adaptations of “classic” pieces of literature including shortened versions of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *Macbeth*.⁸ The idea was originally seen as an opportunity for adaptation within the expansive market of printed graphic literature such as pulp novels, comic strips, and comic books within the mid-20th Century.⁹ These comics were seen as spaces of graphic entertainment and literature that could serve as a platform to introduce renowned works of literature, like that of Shakespeare’s plays, to reluctant readers.¹⁰ The Shakespeare texts, alongside the other adapted classic works, were seen as important reading for children – they brought a new audience to the Bard as well as other canonical works. However, as one can see, while changing Shakespeare’s “language” and incorporating it into visual texts has yielded successful results in the past, there seems to be an inherent problem with how the “language” of Shakespeare is framed within not only the rhetoric of adaptation scholarship but in how it is offered to secondary level education students.

Shakespeare “graphic novel” adaptations

Before venturing too far into the problematic aspects of Shakespeare’s texts and pedagogy within education, I want to briefly clarify what I mean by a “graphic novel.” Graphic

⁷ In fact, the *Tales*’ popularity continued into the 20th Century, where stateside it was reprinted in 1893 in a fully illustrated, color-plated second volume “with a continuation” of the stories by Harrison S. Morris.

⁸ Classic Comics were usually printed between 50-60 pages. They were later renamed Classics Illustrated.

⁹ Albert Kanter, the original founder of Classic Comics, wasn’t wrong in his prediction as between 1941-1963 the Classics Illustrated line sold over 200 million comics. With these numbers, not only was Shakespeare selling within these graphic adaptations, he was once more seen as a main form of commercial entertainment.

¹⁰ William B. Jones, “Albert Kanter’s Dream,” in *Classics Illustrated: A Cultural History*, 2nd Ed, (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2011), 9.

novels are usually, but simplistically understood as “book-length” comics. This isn’t entirely untrue but it’s also not entirely correct; graphic novels can be over hundreds of pages, whereas a “comic book” is usually 22-32 pages long. Graphic novels are not always part of an ongoing series, but they can be. Sometimes, an anthologized volume of issues in an ongoing comic series such as *Uncanny X-Men* (1963-2012), can be considered a “graphic novel.” However, the idea of a “graphic novel” is at times misleading as the “novel” part of the term implies that it is always fiction.¹¹ This would be wrong as a generalization, however, as many graphic novels are written with the intention of portraying actual historical events such as the Eisner Award winning series, *March* by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell, that depicts major events that follow John Lewis and other civil rights leaders of the 1960s. To that end, graphic novels have also been utilized as textbooks in some instances.¹² Because of their inherent educational value within the graphic novel’s pictorial design and hybridity of text-images, and the rising use of them as learning tools, there has been an uptake in the need for “alternative” text adaptations to classic literature.¹³ Enter the Shakespeare graphic novel adaptation. In fact, as Douglas Lanier points out, it was around the time of the 1990s popular “Shakespeare teen film,” that there was an

¹¹ William Boerman-Cornell, Jung Kim, and Michael L. Manderino, “What Are Graphic Novels?,” in *Graphic Novels in High School and Middle School Classrooms: A Disciplinary Literacies Approach* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017), 18.

¹² Boerman-Cornell, Kim, and Manderino, “Graphic Novels in Teaching Academic Disciplines,” 40. The authors highlight that there has been an uptake in STEM textbooks that come with detailed pictorial illustrations that are more active than mere illustrated models.

¹³ Stephen E. Tabachnick and Esther Bendit Saltzman, *Drawn From the Classics: Essays on Graphic Adaptations of Literary Works* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2015). This anthologized volume of essays comes from critics, instructors, and teachers who have utilized graphic novels within their classroom and found that mostly positive results. Also see: Boerman-Cornell, Kim, and Manderino cite Frey and Fisher (2004), Leckbee (2005), Doran (2008), Hammond (2009), Schwartz (2006), Gillenwater (2012), Delaney (2012), and Jimenez & Meyer (2016) as all studies in which middle school to high school-aged students were introduced and utilized graphic novels in the classroom to positive results.

It is worth noting that Scott McCloud, *Understanding the Invisible Art of Comics* (1993), disagrees with the notion of comic books and graphic novels being seen as mere text-image “hybrids.” Thinking this too simplistic, McCloud mentions that to see the text-image combination as a “hybrid,” diminishes the importance of white spaces between comic panels that are meant to create the story and movement of the action. As McCloud calls them, the “real magic” of comic books, 95.

uptake in graphic novel depictions and understandings of Shakespeare adaptation and appropriation.¹⁴ As exemplified by Baz Luhrman's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), Shakespeare could come to inhabit a strange experimental place, while still managing to appeal to both a wide domestic audience as well as educational communities.¹⁵ Around the same time as the phenomenon of the "Shakespeare teen film," the late 90s led to an influx of the Japanese comic art known as manga into the United States. Manga, or its English translation of "whimsical pictures," was coined by Japanese artist Hokusai in 1814, and has become "appeal[ing] for [its] ability to create bold, dynamic imagery that defies borders and moves energetically across the surface of the page. Manga is alive with motion, energy and sound—it challenges the notion that the activity of reading must be silent, solitary, and subdued."¹⁶ In other words, Manga because of its new and experimental form, allowed for unique and interesting renditions of Shakespeare such as those done by publishing companies like SelfMadeHero and Manga Classics. However, because of their popularity in classrooms, Manga Shakespeare, Classical Comics, and other unabridged graphic novel adaptations, have become the epicenter for most of the criticism done on graphic novels within Shakespeare adaptation.

This is not surprising – Manga Shakespeare companies are well-respected in educational circles, usually developed alongside Shakespeare academics, and provide interesting content

¹⁴ Douglas Lanier, "Recent Shakespeare Adaptation and the Mutations of Cultural Capital," in *Shakespeare Studies* 38, (2010), 104-113. Lanier argues that the "teen film" made a case for why the "language" of Shakespeare can be loosened – there are "more" understandings of Shakespeare than just the "language," 108.

¹⁵ Lanier talks about educational environments not only benefiting from sensational "Shakespeare teen films," but also education *markets*, leading to further arguments of capitalism and global impact. On the other hand, Sue Gregory, "Making Shakespeare our contemporary: teaching *Romeo and Juliet* at Key Stage Three," argues for the use of explicitly violent Shakespeare adaptations in the classroom such as *Romeo + Juliet* for their effect in leading to interesting conversation and dialogue.

¹⁶ Shannon R. Mortimore-Smith, "Shakespeare Gets Graphic: Reinventing Shakespeare Through Comics, Graphic Novels, and Manga" in *Locating Shakespeare in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Gabrielle Malcolm and Kelli Marshall (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 88.

when it comes to the graphic depictions of Shakespeare's beloved characters.¹⁷ In fact, many critics, such as Mortimore-Smith and Gravett,¹⁸ have chosen to focus on the style, design, and emotional "whimsicality" of the characters within manga. The texts' ability to portray the wide-eyed emotions and complexity of Shakespeare's language and writing through the innocent-faced and petite-featured caricatures has proven an interesting line of inquiry. While other critics, like Sabeti, have focused on the positive use of Manga Shakespeare in the classroom due to its strident fidelity of Shakespeare's texts alongside pictures and illustrations of the play. With this in mind, Sabeti argues that the text becomes almost its own performance depending on how the adaptors choose to compose their version. To that effect, Lanier speaks at length about the capability of "Manga Shakespeare [to become] a means to 'universalize' the form for a broader audience, showing manga's potential power and value as a global lingua franca."¹⁹ In other words, Manga Shakespeare is not only an alternative text to Shakespeare, but a frame in which the "language" of Shakespeare can be internalized. Lanier calls this process of "manga-ifying" Shakespeare "mangafication,"²⁰ because, while there are charming aspects of the manga adaptations, it does seem like their sole purpose is to provide a picture-text translation as opposed to the anthologized Norton Shakespeare. To that end, Manga Shakespeare doesn't necessarily add anything to Shakespeare's language or argue for something more from the original text. However, manga is not the only graphic novel in the game for "replacing" Shakespeare with picture-text alternatives. Classical Comics has several graphic novels that can be customized depending on what kind of Shakespeare "text" the student may want – full text, abridged, or abbreviated.

¹⁷ Lanier discusses academia's long-held respect and partnership for Manga Shakespeare adaptations on 110-112.

¹⁸ Mortimore Smith, 81-92. Paul Gravett, "Manga Ain't What They Used to Be," in *The Times*, 2007.

¹⁹ Lanier, 112.

²⁰ Lanier, 112.

Furthermore, this focus on picture-book translations and “replacement texts” of Shakespeare like that of Manga Shakespeare and Classical Comics seems to be the primary focus of current criticism. This is not necessarily a bad thing as there are many benefits and purposes in studying these side-by-side translation texts. Shakespeare’s language does not always need to be challenged, and “changing” and modifying large portions of his writing certainly does not always make an adaptation better. However, I would suggest that an adaptation must question fundamental problems that exist within the play; after all, Shakespeare is more than a “language.” When Shakespeare’s “word” goes unquestioned, there is opportunity for his stories’ more problematic aspects to go unnoticed, unchanged, and undisputed. As Finlayson points out, this problematic unquestioning of Shakespeare can arise in the faithful, but popularly used side-by-side translation technique most often used by Manga Shakespeare and Classical Comics.²¹ Studying yet another manga adaptation, Finlayson argues that “manganification” of Shakespeare’s text can often lead to the minimization of some of the important issues within his plays. Utilizing SelfMadeHero’s *Othello* text, Finlayson points out that the graphic novel chooses to cut the scenes of Othello killing Desdemona in their marital bed. This stylistic choice, while perhaps minor in the eyes of the graphic novel’s editing team, seemingly diminishes the domestic, sexual crisis of the play, and instead, frames Othello, through his sympathetic expressions, to seem more like a tragic fallen hero. Finlayson believes that this sympathetic pictorial framing of Othello directly opposes any interpretation a reader may have in seeing Othello as a husband who brutally murdered his wife out of domestic abuse and violence. So, while SelfMadeHero did not “change” the language of Shakespeare, it could be argued that they

²¹ J. Caitlan Finlayson, “Killing Desdemona: Staging Sexual Violence in *Othello* Graphic Novels,” in *Drawn From the Classics: Essays on Graphic Adaptations of Literary Works*, ed. Stephen E. Tabachnick and Esther Bendit Saltzman (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2015), 46-59.

failed to make an adaptation that reframed the play or challenged the misogynistic readings that often fall upon *Othello*. Changing the language and reframing the way we look at Shakespeare's importance does not mean that we aren't keeping Shakespeare "sacred"; it merely means we are "challenging" the perspective of how he is looked at within a broader cultural context. And you'll notice, simply because Shakespeare's language isn't changed within the Manga Shakespeare – and therefore, remains unchallenged – it isn't necessarily always the best resource for teaching the most important content of the drama.

Education & the "myth" of Shakespeare

With that in mind, I want to be clear, I'm not arguing that Will Shakespeare, playwright and poet, is not a legendary figure within our cultural zeitgeist, or that his language is somehow flawed. But cultural attitudes, such as that shared by the anonymous academic within Sabeti's writing, can imply that Shakespeare was written fully formed and independently complete by the Bard himself. Shakespeare *is* one of the greatest literary figures, but to say that he is simply a "language" is to also blot out the multitude of source texts, the early modern printers, and the countless other people who may have had a hand in Shakespeare's writing and process. Moreover, work such as that of Alan Sinfield's on early modern printing presses has proven that there is no "definitive text" of Shakespeare.²² However, the decades of Shakespearean criticism beforehand Sinfield's findings, which claimed that Shakespeare was "the greatest figure in our literary culture [have been largely] upheld."²³ Martin Blocksidge, studying educational trends of Shakespeare pedagogy in the UK, remarks that this idea has not only affected Shakespearean

²² Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

²³ Martin Blocksidge, "Shakespeare: iconic or relevant?," in *Shakespeare in Education*, ed. Martin Blocksidge (London: Continuum, 2003), 12.

criticism, but has trickled down into the way Shakespeare is taught.²⁴ Likewise, within U.S. high school curriculum, Shakespeare (both the person and the text) are especially mythologized, forced, and often daunting to students. One only needs to search the Common Core Standards’²⁵ homepage to discover that “the English language arts [...] require certain critical content for all students, including classic myths and stories from around the world, America’s founding documents, foundational American literature, and Shakespeare.”²⁶ In other words, Shakespeare, in the U.S.’ foremost standardized curriculum, is thought to be the most notable author. After all, he is the only one that is explicitly “named.” His importance, as Blocksidge pointed out, is easy to see, as he is set alongside “classic myths,” “America’s founding documents,” and other “foundational” literature. And while some of these pieces of writing have some debate as to what they could mean, Shakespeare is non-negotiable. Students *must* know Shakespeare. This is the “myth” of Shakespeare when it comes to English education: there is nothing else more important than his written texts. And this vast “importance” and necessity of Shakespeare looms within students’ minds.

Ralph Cohen, emphasizing the “Seven Deadly Fears of Shakespeare” in secondary education, remarks that the “Sixth” strongest anxiety surrounding Shakespeare is that of his language.²⁷ As he shows in *ShakesFear and How to Cure It: The Complete Handbook for Teaching Shakespeare*, Cohen remarks that “the worst of the barriers to your students’ enjoyment of Shakespeare’s plays is the belief that he wrote in another language.”²⁸ Cohen is an interesting example in the case of Shakespeare’s language as he does not strongly support the

²⁴ Blocksidge, 13.

²⁵ 41 states use the Common Core, but many have their own method/version of the standards. So, once they adopt them, they have a chance to tweak/change curriculum based on needs.

²⁶ “Myths vs. Facts,” Common Core: State Standards Online, Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2020.

²⁷ Ralph Cohen, “Seven Deadly Preconceptions of Teaching Shakespeare,” in *ShakesFear and How to Cure It: The Complete Handbook for Teaching Shakespeare* (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2018), 3-17.

²⁸ Cohen, 17.

usage of adaptations within the classroom, but at the same time, he suggests that the language of Shakespeare is not “another language.” In doing so, Cohen attempts to dissemble the “myth” of Shakespeare’s language in that it is more contemporary than students are led to believe. Instead, he argues that Shakespeare’s writing is exemplary of how everyday speech has shifted within its uses. And while Cohen’s work is admirable in trying to allay students’ fears, it does not address a need to *challenge* the “myth” surrounding Shakespeare’s language within secondary level curriculum, and therefore, does not do much to disentangle it from how it is presented within classrooms. While it is easy to tell high school students – “it’s just modern English!” – the literary mythos that is curated within the writing and texts of Shakespeare is not only awe-inspiring in its supposed greatness, but rather intimidating. After all, his so-called “modern English” looks a whole lot different from that of their own.

That said, it is no wonder why there is a fear in “challenging” Shakespeare’s language within both classroom and academic scholarship with radical and newly designed adaptations of his texts. As has been noted by many scholars, the recurring theme within Shakespearean adaptation studies is the tension and reluctance to change – or “paraphrase” – Shakespeare’s language. His scripts and poetry have come to represent the embodiment of all that Shakespeare is, and more importantly, all that Shakespeare *can* be to our culture and our students. Taking after Maynard, Lanier facetiously questions the topic, “What else do you study when you study Shakespeare?”²⁹ Like Blocksidge’s work on the emphasis of Shakespeare’s language in education, Lanier goes onto to mention that Shakespeare “the text” and the “verbal particularities of his scripts” has been the focus of Shakespeare academia for most of the 20th Century.³⁰ But

²⁹ Douglas Lanier, “Shakespearean Rhizomatics: Adaptation, Ethics, Value,” in *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*, eds. Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 21.

³⁰ Lanier, 21.

even with the rising interest in studying Shakespeare adaptation especially in films, TV shows, and graphic novels, there is a hierarchal system and practice in place within most of academia that situates Shakespeare “the text” versus Shakespeare “the adaptation.”³¹ Shakespeare “the text” is seen as the one true Shakespeare, whereas the adaptation’s sole purpose becomes derivative, a point of order to lead us back the high cultural “text” of Shakespeare. If that’s the case, I would amend Lanier’s question by asking: “What else do we study when we study adaptation?” This is why it’s important to focus more on graphic novel adaptations within the classroom, besides simply using them as educational support tools alongside the texts of the plays. In choosing to focus more on the illustrations, the layout, the design, the format, and the hand-drawn characterizations of these adapted texts, not only is the graphic novel given more of a nuanced form of attention and respect, but Shakespeare can be further explored and discovered not only by scholars but also secondary level education students. In this way, choosing to focus more on adaptations as individual texts, in *dialogue* with Shakespeare, subverts the hierarchal system of Shakespeare adaptation versus Shakespeare “the text.”

The “language” of the graphic novel

That said, graphic novel adaptations serve as an interesting counter option to Shakespeare’s play texts since graphic novels supply their own unique form of language which possesses the ability to complicate Shakespeare’s.³² As McNicol argues “the role of the comic book reader [is] a crucial one; meaning does not reside in the text itself, but is created through

³¹ Lanier, 21.

³² McCloud, *Understanding the Invisible Art of Comics* (1993), suggests that comic books possess a “language of [their] own,” 17. While McNicol (2014), goes a step further in suggesting that not only graphic novels have a language of their own, they possess a potential that allows them to partake in dialogue alongside established texts such as Shakespeare.

the interaction of reader, image and text.”³³ Therefore, the interaction between the reader, the image, and the text, “require[s] a substantial degree of reader participation for narrative interpretation; thus fostering a form of interpretive intimacy.”³⁴ But this complicated intimacy can be off-putting to some readers as Charles Hatfield has suggested, this complex language of comics can “seem ‘radically fragmented and unstable.’”³⁵ After all, the reader alone has the ability to put meaning to the tension between text and image within comic books – they interpret the action and speed at which it happens on the page. In the case of graphic novel adaptations, this complicated interaction requires a fair amount of independence from the “original” text. In other words, the reader must be willing to make their own conclusions and find their own interpretation outside of the text; making the meaning exclusive to the graphic novel adaptation. However, despite possessing such a complicated space of interaction and discourse, graphic novel adaptations of Shakespeare are often prone to stigmatization since graphic novels and comic books at large are seen as limited to adolescent reading. Harkening to an earlier point, this would explain why graphic novel adaptations are utilized in *context* to Shakespeare, but not in dialogue with him.

As McNicol further argues, it is easy to see “comic book adaptations [...] as a stepping stone to the ‘real’ text, a way of introducing young people to works whose language, settings and complexity may be off-putting.”³⁶ McNicol emphasizes that once again, we see the hierarchal

³³ Sarah McNicol, “Releasing the potential of Shakespearean comic book adaptations in the classroom study of *Romeo and Juliet*, in *Studies in Comics* 5, no. 1 (2014), 136. For this portion of the study, McNicol is relying on L.M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1994): “transactional theory of reading in which a literary work is conceived not as an object, but as an experience shaped by the reader under the guidance of the text,” 136.

³⁴ McNicol, 136.

³⁵ As quoted by McNicol, 137. McNicol is referencing: Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi, 2005).

³⁶ McNicol, 132. The approach to viewing Shakespeare graphic novel adaptations as “steppingstones” is hardly a new approach within education. Here, for instance, McNicol is referencing to S. Pomfrett, “Getting Graphic,” *The*

tension between the adaptation and the “real text” of Shakespeare. As a result, graphic novel adaptations, perhaps more so than film, can be swiftly shoehorned into a “steppingstone” for understanding Shakespeare. As the stereotype implies, they seem to form a literal “step” in the process of reading Shakespeare’s Elizabethan English. This attitude is not only limiting in how we read and teach Shakespeare, but also maligns the student, the creators of the comic, and the graphic novel itself. While there are definitive and important studies that show graphic novel adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare can ease the pressure on high school students,³⁷ this rhetoric of framing Shakespearean graphic novels as “stepping stones” makes them into a consuming process for students. In this frame of mind, Shakespeare’s writing requires a step-by-step procedure to introduce, expose, and unburden students from the prospect of facing him “cold turkey.” Plus, graphic novels lose any hope of independence from this process, of being seen as a “text” in and of themselves. Graphic novels are a starting place for students, an entryway, while Shakespeare is what they are *meant* to achieve. This idea can have untended consequences: Shakespeare may be what students are meant to achieve, but if they are not far along enough within their literacy to “understand” Shakespeare, then the “best” they can do is a graphic novel. However, it is also fundamental to point out that while graphic novels are relegated to an adolescent demographic, under the national standard, so is Shakespeare. Despite this overlap amongst this demographic designation, however, graphic novels and comic books are often classified as a genre specifically *catered* to adolescents,³⁸ while Shakespeare is often classified as the text of the truly “enlightened” student.

Bookseller, 2014. J. She also cites Marsh and E. Milliard, *Literacy and Popular Culture* (2000), who also refer to them as a “as steppingstones to other kinds of reading,” 150.

³⁷ See Note 15 for examples of positive results in utilizing graphic novel adaptations in the classroom.

³⁸ Lopes (2006) closely studies the relationship between fandom, “fanboys”/“fangirls,” and the comic book in how socialization of societal stigma has shaped the texts of comic books into a childish, stunted medium. For more, see Paul Lopes, “Culture and Stigma: Popular Culture and the Case of Comic Books,” in *Sociological Forum* 21, no. 3 (September 2006), 387-414.

One solution that has been offered to this “overlap” problem comes from Lanier as he proposes a theory of “rhizomatic” adaptation within Shakespeare: Shakespeare is not just a “text,” but a network of connections and understandings.³⁹ Shakespeare and his “text” then become not a source of origin, but rather just another rhizome of the Shakespearean “network.” I like Lanier’s solution – it seems fluid, resilient, and capable of providing real change for high school students in terms of learning “Shakespeare.” But Lanier does not provide a method of implementing his theory; he only suggests it as a frame by which to approach Shakespeare and subsequent adaptations. My solution: new, radical graphic novel adaptations of Shakespeare. No more text-to-image replacement texts, but challenging, complicated, interpretive stories that walk alongside Shakespeare, rather than positioning him as an origin point. For if we desire to change how Shakespeare is viewed within secondary education, then we must learn to see graphic novel adaptations as part of a process of “change” as well as a continuation of Shakespeare’s cultural impact. As outlined by the book *Shakespeare / Not Shakespeare*, adaptations of Shakespeare are supposed to call into question what we consider “Shakespeare.” In utilizing Lanier’s rhizomatic theory, the authors write: “Shakespeare is both a rhizome and a tracing: many people treat him as a map, using his works to create new lines of flight; others, however, seek to reproduce him and discover and maintain what is ‘really’ Shakespeare.”⁴⁰ And just as “Shakespeare” requires constant redefinition, it is time to reconsider how literary framing of graphic novel depictions of Shakespeare are used within classroom settings. Like McNicol, when she encourages us to engage in a new “discourse” *with* Shakespeare,⁴¹ I also encourage us to change the way we interweave these challenging graphic novel adaptations within Shakespeare and education at

³⁹ Lanier (2014), 21-40.

⁴⁰ Christy Desmet, Natalie Loper, and Jim Casey, *Shakespeare / Not Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2013), 5.

⁴¹ McNicol, 150.

large. Instead of searching for a direct translation to Shakespeare, we should seek to see how he has influenced other art, touched other pieces of writing, and how he is challenged by *that* art.

Our students, through pedagogical practice, should understand the cultural lineage of Shakespeare's legacy, his impact, and the development of that legacy "outside" of his text. With that in mind, the examples of graphic novel texts that will be studied in this thesis are shaped by this belief. In the following sections, I will look to four different versions of Shakespeare graphic novels – *Hamlet* adapted by Manga Classics, *Deadpool Does Shakespeare* written and illustrated by Ian Doescher and illustrated Gerry Duggan respectively, *Uncanny X-Men: She Lies With Angels* written by Chuck Austen and illustrated by Salvador Larroca, and *Prince of Cats* written and created by Ronald Wimberly. With my analysis of these adaptations, I hope to offer ways of both looking at these graphic novels as well as offering them the chance to converge in powerful conversation alongside Shakespeare's text.

MANGA CLASSICS *HAMLET*: A “PICTURE BOOK” OF SHAKESPEARE’S TEXT

As has been discussed in my critical review, Manga Shakespeare adaptations are both popular in education markets as well as a main point of critical focus in terms of graphic novel adaptations of Shakespeare. Most of the time, they offer colorful pages, contemporary adaptations that are both fun and inventive, and pave the way for a new alternative to the Norton Shakespeare. However, I should clarify myself as I may have made these adaptations seem crude or uninspired. Manga Shakespeare texts are a lovely form of adaptation and have been utilized in plenty of educational environments and yielded positive results.⁴² While manga adaptations are often developed with the help of Shakespeare academics, there is also an entire branch of creators who work tirelessly to create illustrated full-text pages of the play. These positions include the script adaptor, the artists, and a handful of editors. Manga adaptors walk a fine line as they manage to capture the full text of the play in illustrated form, while also leaving room for interpretation from the student. This is important as it manages to capture the experience of “reading” the full text of the play, while also enabling a struggling student to visualize Shakespeare’s more complicated and confusing language.

⁴² Sabeti (2017), recognizing the rising trend in the use of alternative manga Shakespeare texts in classrooms across the UK, settles her argument in this position. This is similar to the trends noted by Mortimore-Smith (2012), Lanier (2010), and McNicol (2014) even notes most of the work is done on manga adaptations.

Shari Sabeti, who studied the adaptation process of Manga Shakespeare creators from script-to-text, notes that the creators face a large amount of self-consciousness and anxiety when it comes to adapting Shakespeare. For SelfMadeHero, the Manga Shakespeare company that Sabeti chooses to focus on, they recognize that their texts are widely used within classrooms.⁴³ Students look at these adaptations as valid alternatives to Shakespeare – it requires some amount of “material trust” in the adaptation in order for the student to take it seriously.⁴⁴ “Material trust,” as Sabeti explains, is a certain “faith” students and educators must have in the physical book they read and teach. This leads into a complicated relationship between the creator, Shakespeare’s original text, and the student’s faith in this alternative text. As Sabeti observes, “They [the comic book adaptors] clearly saw the work of adaptation as a pedagogic one; they regarded themselves as mediators between the world of Shakespeare, the comic book and the teenage reader.”⁴⁵ Not only do these manga producers recognize their responsibility in producing something that reflects the essentiality of Shakespeare, they know their work is an “alternative to Shakespeare.”⁴⁶ This is a very hard line to walk. To produce something that is essentially “Shakespeare,” as well as provide a new alternative of Shakespeare to students is difficult. How can these Manga adaptations be an “alternative,” if they never really “change” anything about the text? All things considered, however, most critics of Shakespeare graphic novel adaptations feel as if Manga succeeds in this endeavor.

These attitudes, which are shared by a multitude of academics, are unsurprising when put in the context of the broader sales of manga graphic novels in the United States graphic novel market. While Manga Shakespeare publications thrive in many educational environments, manga

⁴³ Sabeti is writing about the usage of them in the UK – which is wider-reaching than US education.

⁴⁴ Sabeti, 342.

⁴⁵ Sabeti, 339.

⁴⁶ Sabeti, 339-340.

graphica in general offers a hint as to why Manga Shakespeare adaptations were developed in the first place: diversity in audience size as well as large sale profits. Manga was first introduced in the United States back in the 1970s, when one of the figureheads of the “blockbuster manga texts” in Japan, Osamu Tezuka, converted his influential texts into televised anime programs.⁴⁷ It was through this exposure of anime that many American audiences “first encountered the drawing styles that are specific to Japanese comics.”⁴⁸ And what started out as an underground movement of the 1970s, became very popular as manga diversified itself for specialized audiences. Robin Brenner elaborates that “manga today is marketed by age range and gender, from children’s manga (*kodomo*), boys’ manga (*shōnen*), girls’ manga (*shōjo*), women’s manga (*josei*), men’s manga (*seinen*), and adult pornographic manga.”⁴⁹ The public market for teenage-centric manga texts has grown so much in the past 50 years, that major educational publishing companies like Scholastic and Macmillan have developed comic book and manga-centric imprints known as Graphix and Papercutz, respectively.⁵⁰ To add, it is not only young adult publication markets that are in high demand of manga texts, but also librarians, educators, and even students themselves. Danielle Rich, who studies library and information science, notes that “Japanese manga have found purchase in US public life thanks to the efforts of librarians, teachers and teenage readers to place these books in public and school libraries.”⁵¹ With this in mind, the popularity of Manga Shakespeare adaptations within both the education market and the classroom comes at no surprise. Manga is quick to read (with the average page taking less than 4

⁴⁷ As noted by Gwen Athene Tarbox, “Critical Uses” in *Children’s and Young Adult’s Comics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 109.

⁴⁸ Tarbox, 109.

⁴⁹ Robin E. Brenner, “Manga” in *Pop Culture in Asia and Oceania: Entertainment and Society Around the World*, ed. J.A. Murray and K. Nadeau (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2016), 93-97. Quoted by Tarbox, 109.

⁵⁰ Launched in 2005, Scholastic’s Graphix imprint reprinted and reissued long-running book series such as *Bone* (1991-2004) as graphic novels, while Macmillan’s Papercutz imprint launched a new line of manga-inspired adaptations of *Nancy Drew Mystery Series*. For more information, see Tarbox, “Introduction,” 1-16.

⁵¹ Tarbox quotes Brenner, 95.

seconds to read), popular among educators and students, and provides unique, interesting portrayals of the plays and texts in question.

The specific adaptation I have chosen to focus on, Manga Classics' edition of *Hamlet*, published September of 2019, is the eighth adaptation done by Crystal S. Chan and her production team. They have also worked on Shakespeare titles such as *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet*, while also tending to other canonical works such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, an anthology of various poems by Edgar Allan Poe, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, and Jane Austen's *Emma*. And while that is a particularly wide range of texts, Manga Classics has more on the way with an adaptation of the beloved children's novel, *Anne of Green Gables*, set to be released November of 2021. With so many eclectic pieces of canonical literature in their wheelhouse, it is no wonder that Manga Classics boasts on its "About" page as being, "The finest name in adaptations of beloved classic literature!" Although there is no actual way to "prove" this, publishers, teachers, and top educational critics across the country, seem to agree. For instance, in the case of the newly published adaptation of *Hamlet*, The *Kirkus Review* remarks: "[Crystal] Chan has here kept the full script of Hamlet intact and, in collaboration with illustrator Choy, made this piece come alive. For readers who cannot make it to the theater to see Hamlet performed and for those who struggle to read the original, in particular, this is an accessible and appealing alternative."⁵² While the *School Library Journal* notes that this new publication of *Hamlet* "is a dramatic, striking version of Shakespeare's tale of murder and madness," they also argue: "This vividly violent tale will appeal to ambitious manga readers and can serve as supplemental material for the study of *Hamlet*."⁵³ But perhaps more

⁵² "HAMLET: From the Manga Classics series," *Kirkus Review*, Kirkus Media, February 17, 2020. Please note, the reviewer is referring to "access" in terms of educational value to students who may not have physical "access" to performances of *Hamlet*, versus disability studies use of the term "accessibility."

⁵³ Anna Murphy, "Hamlet," *School Library Journal*, AKJ Education, January 17, 2020.

important, rather than the adaptations' adequate representations of the original text, is the capability of these books to portray not only the full-text of the original but also to represent the appropriate setting and time. In a spotlight issue of their monthly blog, *Publisher's Weekly* spoke with Manga Classics' chief of operations, Erik Ko, to talk about the process of developing these graphic novels. Ko elaborates that "'Previous graphic novel and comic attempts have always been more truncated and summarized.' The creative teams behind Manga Classics conduct exhaustive research, even traveling to the books' settings, to help them create period-appropriate art."⁵⁴ Obviously, there is a lot of exhaustive work and research put into each one of these books – Manga Shakespeare adaptations are not, in any means, *easy* to produce.

To highlight this specifically in the Manga Shakespeare text of *Hamlet*, Chan describes the exhaustive process in adapting the "To Be, or Not to Be" soliloquy:

I want to talk about how we handled the situation surrounding the famous line, "To be, or not to be, that is the question." This line is very well-known, but not everyone agrees on exactly what it means. Generally, there are three possible explanations: Hamlet may be talking about killing himself, about killing other people for revenge, or simply musing about the nature of death.

Readers can make a reasonable and convincing argument for any one of these explanations. However, I only picked one explanation for the artist to draw, then I would have set the tone for the rest of the book to follow, and the other two explanations would have been wiped out. Therefore, I explained the meaning of all three to the artist and asked him to design a layout that can represent all three meanings.⁵⁵

Here, Chan describes the breakdown of how they adapted the mega-famous soliloquy. She makes it abundantly clear that it was important to her and the other producers that they leave an "open" interpretation to the audience. But in doing so, she sums up "three" conclusive understandings of the speech: Hamlet's own suicidal thought, his desire to seek revenge for the death of his father, and the very nature of death itself. And it is these three conclusive

⁵⁴ "Comics in the Classroom: Spotlight on Manga Classics," *Publisher's Weekly* (blog), August 17, 2018.

⁵⁵ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. & adapted by Crystal S. Chan (Richmond Hill, Ontario: Manga Classics, 2019), 1.

understandings that Chan attempts to have illustrated within the pages. Indeed, looking at Julien Choy's design of the soliloquy, Chan's work does not go unnoticed.

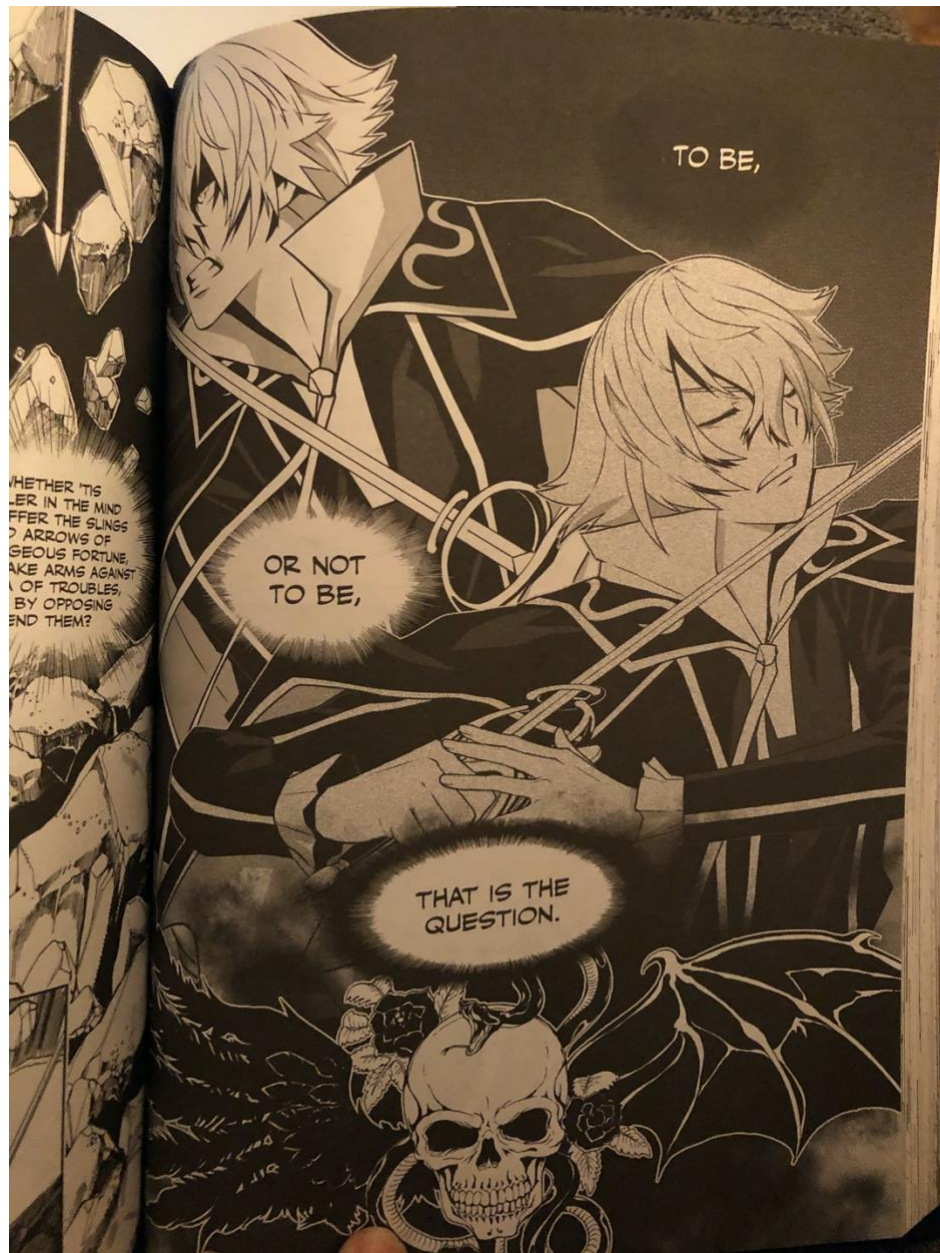


Figure 1: Julien Choy, "Hamlet's indecision."

The full-page depiction of the iconic line becomes a nuanced mishmash of Hamlet's desire for revenge, his crippling despair, and the underlying ideology of death that lurks beneath it all.⁵⁶ The reader, as per Chan's hopes, does get a sense of complicated emotion and conflict – it's not entirely clear what Hamlet feels, nor what his audience should feel. Plus, Choy's usage of the natural blending of Hamlet's posturing across the page, adds to this feeling of complexity within emotion and conflict. Hamlet could feel all of these things all at once, or none of them at all. The fact of the matter is Choy's art and Chan's decision to leave the soliloquy open for interpretation, allows for readers to decide that on their own. This is a common "rhetorical strategy" within Manga Shakespeare texts: they utilize pictures and images to visualize what cannot be easily depicted from a written script. As Sabeti asserts, in quoting one adaptor, "the comic book 'doesn't like dwelling too long on the text. You've got to move on. But there are ways to refer to it in the drawings, while still cutting it out of the speeches. It shows a particular reverence, a desire to be "true" to the source.'" ⁵⁷ In other words, images *imply* what the text cannot. Truly, this is a powerful testament to graphic pictorial adaptations of Shakespeare: they can emphasize aspects of the text that a script cannot. But it also emphasizes the lengths the adaptors of Manga Shakespeare go to ensure that the audience still has the chance to reckon with their own interpretation of the text – just as they would reading it within the original play text.

However, while they are exhaustive products of labor, research, and time, this effort by Manga Classics is done in an attempt to remain "faithful" to the text. Written on their "About" page, Manga Classics testifies of their "*faithful* adaptations of classic literature [that are] created by artists who have a genuine passion for the story they have produced. In the back of each copy

⁵⁶ Julien Choy, "Hamlet's indecision," in Manga Classics *Hamlet* (Richmond Hill, Ontario: Manga Classics, 2019), 194.

⁵⁷ Sabeti, 343-344.

of Manga Classics, you get their insights and feelings about the development for every character.”⁵⁸ As many adaptation scholars will note, “faithful adaptation” is a phrase rooted in the oftentimes, problematic “fidelity” rhetoric of the adaptation field. “Fidelity” implies that an adaptation must be “faithful” to the source text in some kind of vague, but rather undefinable methodology. As one can guess, it’s rather hard to define what it means to be “faithful” to a source text, especially when adaptors are working with an entirely different medium. Thomas Leitch probably says it best in “Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory,” when he writes that

Fidelity to its source text—whether it is conceived as success in re-creating specific textual details or the effect of the whole—is a hopelessly fallacious measure of a given adaptation's value because it is unattainable, undesirable, and theoretically possible only in a trivial sense. Like translations to a new language, adaptations will always reveal their sources’ superiority because whatever their faults, the source texts will always be better at being themselves.⁵⁹

In other words, at least to Leitch, “faithful” adaptation is not possible in the grand scheme of things because an adaptation is not ever going to be the “original” source text. What’s more is that many adaptation scholars like Leitch, Douglas Lanier, and Kyle Meikle,⁶⁰ suggest that when “faithfulness” or “fidelity” is centralized, even in Shakespeare adaptations, it can lead to hierarchal understandings of the literature-adaptation relationship. As it enforces the understanding that the adapted work *must* follow the lead of the text or it lacks a superior quality exemplified in the established text. And when we turn to Manga Classics’ adaptation of *Hamlet*,

⁵⁸ “About Manga Classics,” *Manga Classics*, 2018. My emphasis is used here.

⁵⁹ Thomas Leitch, “Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory,” in *Criticism* 45, no. 2 (2003), 161.

⁶⁰ Kyle Meikle, “Rematerializing Adaptation Theory,” in *Literature/Film Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2013), 174-183. Meikle makes the argument that adaptation is often seen as part of a “hierarchal process in which adapters convert crude materials into more refined objects—a project that casts books as natural resources and adapters as drillers, miners, and quarriers employed in the business of natural resource extraction,” 174. In other words, adapted sources seem to reap “valuable resources” from their original text, only to leave them less complete than before.

with this “faithful” rhetoric in mind, there is an understanding that the adaptation is *loyal* to the language and textual consistency of Shakespeare.

While the adaptation is charmingly drawn by artist Julien Choy, the head adaptor and editor of the project, Chan, has made sure to keep the story, the full-text, and the language of Shakespeare intact. As for the drawings of the text, while they are beautifully done, they exemplify commonplace, stereotypical depictions of Shakespeare’s characters. Hamlet is a broody teenager donned in all-black, Ophelia is maidenly dressed in white with innocent, unassuming expressions, Claudius is proud and presumptuous, and Gertrude thinly masks her emotional distress when it comes to Hamlet. If there has ever been a true attempt at a “faithful” adaptation, Chan’s work seemingly models perfect “fidelity.” It is no wonder why so many critics find themselves enamored with Manga Shakespeare adaptations such as Chan’s: Manga Classics is out to faithfully portray Shakespeare as best they can. It’s worth noting then, the company is not trying to create adaptations that dramatically break from the text, as they mention: “Not only does the manga format create a greater appeal of classic literature for a new generation but it also provides context making the story even more accessible.”⁶¹ Manga Classics’ main goals are to adapt these stories as “faithfully” as possible, bring them into accessible reach to new readers, and “re”-introduce these iconic stories to a new generation.

That is not to say that this endeavor isn’t admirable. It’s obviously in line with what inspired the Lambs’ to reintroduce Shakespeare’s plays in paraphrased and easy-to-understand language, as well as Classics Illustrated’s line of adapted comic book classics. However, what I find troubling about Manga Shakespeare is not the medium itself, but rather the “idea” that I fear Manga Classics highlights in its pursuit to be faithful to Shakespeare and his language. Though

⁶¹ “About Manga Classics,” *Manga Classics*, 2018.

these character depictions presented in the adaptation seem “faithful,” perhaps it would be more accurate to say that these characterizations are more-or-less “accurate” to timely interpretations of the characters. In other words, these characterizations are what most audiences have grown used to in their expectation of the play’s characters. For instance, although Hamlet is often played by older actors in performances (Laurence Olivier, Kenneth Branagh, Benedict Cumberbatch, etc.), his impulsivity, erratic attitude, and general “moodiness” aligns well with what contemporary audiences identify as “teenage angst.” That said, this adaptation is not particularly “faithful” of Hamlet (as a written character)⁶², but rather faithful to the contemporary cultural “understanding” of the character. That is the problem with “fidelity rhetoric,” as Leitch pointed out, because it is impossible to perfectly translate the original text to the adapted medium, cultural understandings, well-known interpretations and stereotypes sneak into these so-called “faithful” adaptations without much notice. Fidelity is more or less an illusion, or in softer terms, an “ideal,” but not a reality. Therefore, even though Manga Shakespeare may go to great lengths to show their “faithfulness” to the original text, they still struggle to “recreate” a perfect illustrated copy of Shakespeare. Even so, despite this imperfection in the process of “faithful” adaptation, there is still a necessity within these manga adaptations to preserve Shakespeare, or rather their “idea” of Shakespeare. After all, in the case with Manga Classics, the company does prioritize keeping the full text of *Hamlet*, as well as the appropriate time and setting of the play. Though they may struggle under the weight of perfect fidelity to the text, Manga Classics maintains the “appearance” of a faithful adaptation.

⁶² After all, Hamlet around thirty years old by the end of the play. As note by the First Clown: “the very day that young Hamlet was born...I have been sexton here, man and boy, thirty years. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Norton Shakespeare 2nd Edition, New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2008). 5.1.149-150.

Despite manga's struggle in pursuit of "faithfulness," however, adaptations that claim to be "faithful," usually garner more respect from both educators as well as critics. Manga Classics' website is bordered and underlined with brief, but assuring testimonials from educators across the language arts spectrum that tout the effectiveness of these adaptations. Furthermore, while Shakespeare's texts are arguably a sometimes-"monolith" in high school education systems across the US, manga is an increasingly popular subject in research and study among adaptation scholars. As shown in my critical review, most of the scholarly focus is pointed at manga adaptations of Shakespeare. This critical focus as well as the praise manga Shakespeare adaptations receive is not ill-placed, as they do provide beautifully illustrated full-text versions of the play. However, in all their efforts to prioritize Shakespeare, it seems like these so-called "faithful" adaptations can lack a sense of awareness to the original text. So, while Manga adaptations offer charming, inventive twists of Shakespeare's original works, I don't see them as particularly demanding of Shakespeare's language or texts. That is to say, they don't "ask" much of him, nor are they particularly interested in "talking" to him, but rather, in an effort to remain "faithful" to the text, they only end up as an imperfect, illustrated "copy" of Shakespeare's play. This is not necessarily a "bad" thing, but as Finalyson pointed out, who studied the SelfMadeHero adaptation of *Othello*, the adaptors of the project did not do much to mitigate complicated misogynistic meanings and readings of the play.⁶³ What could have been used as an opportunity to change the way *Othello* is viewed by the audience, was only further reinforced in the sympathetic portrayal of him in the adaptation. With that in mind, adaptations do not necessarily need to dig "deep" into the text or upend the meaning behind the language, but they should recognize problematic understandings within the text. After all, it is the duty of all

⁶³ Finalyson (2015), 46-59.

contemporary adaptations, despite their take on how they adapt the text, to communicate an awareness of the problems, tensions, and undercurrents of the original texts. Especially when these texts, such as Manga

Shakespeare adaptations, are read by a large demographic of impressionable students as well as educators. Deeply misogynistic readings, such as those portrayed in *Othello*, should be poked at or interrogated to communicate something emblematic of the contemporary. In Manga Classics' *Hamlet*, I have noticed these same problematic undercurrents as well. Hamlet's "get thee to a nunnery" speech to Ophelia in Act 3, Scene 1, for instance, offers a concerning spin on the original text:



Figure 2: Julien Choy, "Hamlet attacks Ophelia."

After aggressively invading Ophelia's personal space in the previous panels, Hamlet's diatribe against her comes to a head in these above-pictured images.⁶⁴ The first panel portrays Hamlet violently striking Ophelia across the face, which is only emphasized by the use the onomatopoeia "SMAK!" The use of sound to convey emphasis is a longtime staple of comic book graphia, but most of the time, sound is often conveyed by interesting letters smashed together, an experiment to showcase how visual imagery of letters can portray auditory "sound."⁶⁵ This particular use of the onomatopoeia is not particularly creative, but rather blunt – the physical act of "smacking" sounds like how it is spelled. There is no need for clever creativity here: the sound speaks for itself. And then, after suddenly striking Ophelia, Hamlet then grabs her cheek in the next panel. His hand becomes a character in its own right as it occupies nearly as much of the panel's spacing as Ophelia's own face does. "God has given you one face," Hamlet remarks while holding onto Ophelia's reddened and swollen face, "and you make yourselves another" (208). While Hamlet is the one decrying women's duplicitous "faces," he is the only one who has violently abused the flesh of Ophelia's own cheek. In that same line of thought, perhaps the argument could be made that Choy's art showcases the physical and verbal power Hamlet has over Ophelia. This not only shows him as a problematic character, but as a deeply flawed one as well. However, nothing is shown or drawn to question Hamlet's abusive power. If anything, the adaptation emphasizes Hamlet's madness, aggression, and hatred for women.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Julien Choy, "Hamlet attacks Ophelia," in *Manga Classics Hamlet* (Richmond Hill, Ontario: Manga Classics, 2019), 208.

⁶⁵ McCloud (1993) cites that, "comics is a mono-sensory medium. It relies on only one of the senses to convey a world of experience. But what of the other four? We represent sound through devices such as word balloons. But all in all, it is an exclusively visual representation," 89.

⁶⁶ While the Ophelia scene is striking in its clarity, I have chosen to include it here for its brevity. There is a far longer, but perhaps all the more interesting scene between Gertrude and Hamlet on 271-293. It covers the events of Act 3, Scene 4 – Hamlet kills Polonius and then proceeds to confront Gertrude. And as expected from such a scene,

In the proper classroom environment, a scene such as this could probably serve as a subject for lucrative class discussion. But there are ways to portray Hamlet's anger and disgust with womankind without portraying his violent and aggressive act of *hitting* Ophelia. It is one thing when the historical text itself portrays abuse, but it is another when modern adaptations repeat that abuse. This scene alone, with Hamlet's hurtful words towards the creation and eventual marriage of women, is verbally abusive, but it was originally written in the early modern era. Historicizing Ophelia's verbal abuse to students at least provides a way in which to explain Shakespeare's text, but for an adaptation written so recently, it is unacceptable. At the bare minimum, it is my understanding that adaptations should change the misogynistic and errant readings of the original author, not add to them. Shakespeare did not write this violent physical abuse into *Hamlet*, but it was added by the adaptors. Modern adaptations are privileged with being written, filmed, illustrated, and created 400 years after Shakespeare – they are endowed with the knowledge of our contemporary moment. Just as we call historic art into question now, Shakespeare and his original text must also be interrogated. Whether modern adaptations choose to challenge the language of Shakespeare or choose to pursue a more “faithful” marriage between adaptation and the text is another matter, but all modern adaptations must show an awareness to “the text.”

With this in mind, the idea that Manga Shakespeare is a “correct” and complete translation from Shakespeare the “text” into Shakespeare the “text + pictures,” is not entirely accurate. This leads me to believe that some of the scholarly excitement over Manga Shakespeare adaptations is somewhat misplaced. Although the Manga Classics *Hamlet* provides a full-text illustrated rendition of the play, it lacks a particular awareness of the text's faults.

the illustrations are a collision of motion, aggression, and movement. Hamlet is particularly displayed in close contact with Gertrude, often grabbing at her forcefully, and shoving her into walls.

Staying faithful to Shakespeare's plots and language is important, especially when he is being taught to second-level education students (who may be reading Shakespeare for the first time), but it should not take precedence over confronting true problematic issues within the original text. There is a difference, after all, between staying faithful, but alert to the text's problematic readings, and staying faithful, but "passive" to the text's problems. When Shakespeare is not challenged, when he is left to his own devices, Manga Classics *Hamlet* provides an example of what can happen: the problems of his text are emphasized for shallow dramatics, but the language remains intact. The adaptations we should be showing our students should demand "more" of Shakespeare. That said, that is why my examples for graphic novel adaptations are about "rebuilding" the understanding of the pedagogical framework of Shakespeare. I would argue that ideally the goal of graphic novel adaptations of Shakespeare, when used in an educational context, should be more than staying "faithful" to the text, but rather to encourage readers to question, challenge, and contemplate its meanings. Though Manga has served as an interesting starting point for how graphic novel texts can come to stand-in for the original play text, in the next section, I will analyze a comic book that can act as a playful introduction for first-time readers of Shakespeare.

DEADPOOL DOES SHAKESPEARE: A “NEW” INTRODUCTION TO SHAKESPEARE

Deadpool Does Shakespeare, originally printed in *Deadpool* #21 in May 2017, has since appeared in the anthologized graphic novel, *Deadpool: World's Greatest Vol. 7*, written by the pop Shakespeare guru, Ian Doescher.⁶⁷ Doescher's Shakespearean spin-off was originally premiered within the ambitious mega-issue of *Deadpool* #21 alongside the usual story of the comic, that was written and illustrated by Gerry Duggan and Bruno Oliveira, respectively. In an effort to celebrate the arc of an event that the series was running⁶⁸, Doescher was approached by Marvel for the project in the hopes that he would take his “pop” knowledge of the Bard and create a mashup of the character within a Shakespearean world. In an interview with *IGN*, Doescher said of the project, “Deadpool is a fantastic Shakespearean character—someone who is sarcastic and funny and constantly breaking the fourth wall. He reminds me of some of Shakespeare's wittiest characters: Hamlet, Benedick (from *Much Ado About Nothing*) and Iago (from *Othello*). He also has a fun mix of being essentially a comic character who finds himself—as in my story—in serious situations.”⁶⁹ In other words, because of Deadpool's ability to upend reality in breaking the fourth wall, showcase his languid sarcasm, and bring a lot of humor into a

⁶⁷ Doescher is best known for his work with the “Shakespeareanized” renditions of the original *Star Wars* trilogy, as well as many other “pop” Shakespeare works such as *MacTrump* (2018), *Taming of the Clueless* (2019), and the upcoming 2021 Shakespeare-centric Avengers novel.

⁶⁸ While Marvel Comics does not usually feature Shakespeare-centric stories, when celebrating a particularly big event or anniversary of a character, they will feature guest writers, artists, or spin-off stories (like Doescher's).

⁶⁹ Jesse Schedeen, “Comic-Con 2016: Marvel Gives Deadpool a Shakespearean Makeover,” *IGN*, IGN Entertainment, July 22, 2016.

story within “serious situations,” Doescher identifies him as a “fantastic Shakespearean character.” With this in mind, it seems that Doescher is drawing on a different understanding of Shakespeare versus the one we have come to identify within academic circles. This “Shakespeare” that Doescher seems to “create” is not marked by lofty, hierarchal attitudes, but rather vulnerable to unserious, if goofy interpretation by comic books characters like Deadpool. In so doing, Doescher not only creates a new contemporary brand of humor in this Shakespearean world, but also reminds his audience that is also Shakespeare full of ridiculous humor and mischief just as Deadpool. Because of Doescher’s understanding of Shakespeare within this comic book, he allows for Deadpool to poke fun at the “serious” attitude of Shakespearean literature, while at the same time, provide a “new” introduction to Shakespeare and his texts.

Moreover, when we consider the origins of Deadpool as a character, it’s important to note that his purpose has always been to inspire thought as well as humored criticism through satire. Deadpool was originally created by Fabian Nicieza and Rob Liefeld in early 1991 to call into question the criteria of superheroes within the comic book community. Disillusioned by all-American, family-values-first superheroes like DC’s Superman and Marvel Comics’ Captain America, Liefeld and Nicieza cooked up the Canadian mutant, Wade Wilson, or as his alias suggests, Deadpool. Deadpool was created to be in direct, subversive opposition to these Golden Age superheroes. Where they were kind, gracious, and polite, Deadpool was crass, vulgar, and perhaps what he is best known for, capable of breaking the fourth wall. In doing so, Deadpool changed the way that comic books were written and more importantly, how they were read. Up until that point, comics – with their panels portraying slices of a parallel world through the artist’s drawn images – were seen as a one-sided story for the reader to consume without

feedback from the actual comic. While most superhero comics offered a “reader forum” at the end of the comic book, where the creators of the book would respond to fan mail (or hate mail, depending on the comic), Deadpool opened the dialogue up within the very story itself. In revolutionary fashion, he talked *back* to the reader. With Deadpool, Liefeld and Nicieza shifted the comic book into a space of conversation, rather than a one-sided story. While Deadpool was not the first comic book character to “talk back” to the reader,⁷⁰ his comic books mainstreamed the method. Other creators had utilized “comic book awareness” (or fourth wall breaking) before, but Liefeld and Nicieza were the most notable to indoctrinate it as a regular method for storytelling. That said, Deadpool’s comics joined the ranks of what is known as “metafiction,” or the idea that is “used to describe a fictional text that self-consciously addresses the devices of fiction, exposing the fictional illusion.”⁷¹ Or as Linda Hutcheon would describe it, ““fiction about fiction, fiction that includes within itself reflections on its own fictional identity.””⁷² Applied to Deadpool, we can recognize he is a character who is insanely aware of his intertextual state – a connector between our world and the world he is written into. This awareness allows Deadpool to critique “himself,” but in the case of the comic book, *Deadpool Does Shakespeare*, he can also critique the high-minded ideals of Shakespeare and his “language.”

However, allow me to clarify: Deadpool is remedial chaos incarnate. His humor ranges from shallow and inappropriate one-liners to displays of highly complex wit that pays off over the course of a story. So, while he obviously possesses the ability to “critique” Shakespeare due to Deadpool’s hypertextual awareness in knowing his own immediacy to the Bard, as well as the

⁷⁰ John Byrne’s *Sensational She-Hulk* (1989) – another favorite character of Marvel Comics’ inventory – was notably one of the first comic book characters to break the fourth wall. She “ripped” her comic book page to speak directly to the viewer.

⁷¹ Marina Gerzic, “Just Shakespeare! Adapting *Macbeth* for Children’s Literature,” in *Locating Shakespeare in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Gabrielle Malcom and Kelli Marshall (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 65.

⁷² Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (New York: Methuen, 1980). As quoted by Gerzic on 65.

complexity of Shakespeare's intellect, it may just as easily be due to Deadpool's "lack" of awareness. Being caught between three worlds – Deadpool's own world of the Marvel Comics Universe, ours due to his understanding of his intertextual state, and the world of Doescher's Shakespearean characters – can cause confusion for the maniacal antihero mercenary. He may not be as entirely aware of Shakespeare's "importance" as we would like him to be. In fact, when he first finds himself within this mashed-up Shakespearean world, Deadpool spends a number of instances carousing with these mixed-up Shakespearean characters as he tries to make sense as to why the characters of these tragedies come to him with such odd demands. Old King Hamlet asks for "revenge" of his death, Juliet means to find Romeo, Lady Macbeth seeks for "power," and Cordelia wants her "picky" father dead. Deadpool meets every challenge he is given with the same chaotic, but optimistic line of questioning: for a "small" amount of money, he will, indeed, take care of these pesky Shakespearean villains. He's not entirely sure why these characters are asking him for help, but his desire to escape this world tells him what he needs to know. This is why I believe *Deadpool Does Shakespeare* would serve as an edgy, "punk," and surprising "new" introduction to Shakespeare. When he enters this world, Deadpool is like many students who approach Shakespeare: confused, unsure of the language, and full of quirky questions. But most importantly, like many high school-aged students, Deadpool's understanding of Shakespeare and his language may be "questionable." So, not only is it the lack of understanding of Shakespeare that offers appeal, but also the "chaos" of the character, which serves as a good reminder that Shakespeare's complex worlds and language require a sense of "waking up" in an unknown, unexplored world.

When the comic opens, Deadpool wakes up to find himself in a Shakespearean castle-world that seems to be comprised of Shakespeare's most notable tragic characters such as Old King

Hamlet, King Lear, Juliet, and Lady Macbeth. To add, the comic spoofs off of many tropes within some of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies such as the haunting of a main character by a recurring ghost, doomed romances, revenge plots, and "eccentric" Shakespearean fathers. And as one can assume, squishing all of Shakespeare's characters into one world, seems to be asking for comedic chaos, despite their tragic origins. It also has several key characters of Shakespeare's comedies such as Falstaff who runs a brothel (fitting), Prospero who owns the library that contains a collection of Shakespeare's plays, and the Merry Wives who happen to be prostitutes. This going to show that even amongst Shakespeare's plays there is an interconnected, rhizomatic quality that Doescher draws from in order to create this liminal world where Deadpool has found himself.

However, in doing so, Doescher seems to create a new spin not simply on Shakespeare's tropes, but also on Northrop Frye's iconic Shakespearean 'green world' in his essay, "Theory of Myths."⁷³ Frye was writing of Shakespeare's comedies when he wrote, "The green world charges the comedies with the symbolism of the victory of summer over winter [...]. The green world has analogies, not only to the fertile world of ritual, but to the dream world that we create out of our own desires. The dream world collides with the stumbling and blinded follies of the world of experience."⁷⁴ In other words, Shakespeare's "green world" is both a liminal space where strange things can happen, but it is also a space where lessons of the "real world" can be learned. In a similar way to Frye's understanding of the green world, Doescher also creates a world conducive to learning in using Shakespeare. By placing Deadpool in this strange Shakespearean realm that is a mishmash of his plays, Doescher enables his audience to not only see Shakespeare as a liminal space of experimentation, but also as a space that offers potential

⁷³ Northrop Frye, "Theory of Myths," in *Anatomy of Criticism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957).

⁷⁴ Frye, 182.

for learning. Shakespeare's plays can intersect and form a rhizomatic world such as the one Deadpool comes to inhabit, but this world is a *messy* one – there is no real order. As the reader finds out, while Deadpool offers us a “glimpse” of Shakespearean tragedy topos, his real purpose in this wacky Shakespearean world is to put the characters and the events of the tragedies back in order so he can escape the “plots” of these plays and return home. This involves him having to read the actual “texts” of Shakespeare to understand the key factors of Shakespeare's tragedies and fix the order of events. In a brilliant move of comedic “reverse psychology,” Deadpool must use his self-awareness and “outsider” status of Shakespeare's texts to become an “insider” to Shakespeare and piece the stories together again. Using a liminal world that is as shambolic as the fourth act of a Shakespeare tragedy, Doescher realigns the chaos and disorder of Frye's “green world” with yet another educational experience. Doescher uses this chaotic world to show that once Shakespeare's tragic plots and characters are put back in order, there is a sense of format, organization, and restoration of something whole.

Furthermore, it is both Deadpool's “outsider” status and his willingness to “critique” Shakespeare, and by effect, “challenge” his texts, that *Deadpool Does Shakespeare* offers a rewarding “newness” and introduction to Shakespeare. Deadpool is constantly aware of his surroundings, commenting on the invisible thoughts of the reader, and answering to unheard “pushback” he may be receiving on the other end of this invisible conversation between him, his world, and the reader. Thinking back to McNicol's explanation of graphic novel adaptations as “steppingstones” to Shakespeare,⁷⁵ in which Shakespeare becomes a “consuming” process for students to unpack, Deadpool offers a way in which students receive a candid, honest glimpse of Shakespeare and his writing. If students are given this text first in a Shakespearean unit on

⁷⁵ McNicol, 136.

tragedy, they are given a fresh angle, an innovative approach to how they view and read Shakespeare. Doescher (with Deadpool's help) offers the potential for a distinctly unique introduction of Shakespeare with a de-Shakespeared text, an edgy and "punk" take on Shakespeare, and the fact that the comic book offers Shakespearean posturing. With these tenets in mind, no longer is Shakespeare an untouchable entity of literary greatness, but rather a malleable "text." If Deadpool, a goofy comic character, doesn't fear him – why should a student?

Taking the expression of "de-Shakespeared" to another level, Deadpool begins his journey within the comic by "ridding" the audience of any preconceived notions of Shakespeare (literally). After finding himself unable to stop speaking in iambic pentameter, Deadpool runs into William Shakespeare himself, who reassures him: "My good man, fear not. Thou speakest in iambic pentameter. It is the lingua franca of the gods, the very music of the spheres. It signifies you are but a character in a play...a play of mine—" ⁷⁶ The reader does not grow too attached to this version of Shakespeare, however, as the reason for the deliberate cut-off of Shakespeare's speech is due to the fact that Deadpool kills him. And without much forethought at that, as Deadpool remarks in excitement: "The bow [his crossbow] doth work him woe and lay him low." ⁷⁷ While minor, it is worth taking note that Deadpool kills Shakespeare at the exact moment when he begins to declare "a play of mine—" as it emphasizes that Shakespeare will not be "telling" us this story, but rather Deadpool's narrative hyperawareness. A nod to Deadpool's unstable positioning within comics narratives, he will not be confined to any "text," and that includes the great "lingua franca" of Shakespeare. Simply put, Deadpool lives outside of Shakespeare's very text (and so does this comic). While it exists outside of Shakespeare's authority, the comic encourages the reader to see a new level of Shakespeare without having to

⁷⁶ Ian Doescher and Bruno Oliveira, *Deadpool Does Shakespeare* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2017), 3.

⁷⁷ Doescher and Oliveira, 3.

do much of the textual deconstruction of reading several plays to parse out the tropes and motifs of Shakespeare's tragedies. This ability to offer the tropes, characteristics, and identifiable features of Shakespeare is important for students – he offers an overview, without bogging them down with confusing, complicated subplots.

And not only does Deadpool offer readers the chance to see him destabilize the understandings of Shakespeare and his text, he also offers a tempting role for his reader: co-conspirator. In her work on children's books utilizing Shakespeare adaptations, Marina Gerzic talks about the importance of giving children a role to fulfill within their own reading of the plays. As she writes, "Pleasure is derived from the reader's understanding and the recognition of these intertextual connections; the reader is part of the 'in group' who 'gets it'; s/he is a cultural insider who revels in his/her insider knowledge."⁷⁸ In other words, Deadpool makes his reader feel as if they're part of the story with the "insider" angle since he confides with his reader. This can be clearly seen when Deadpool, after escaping from his run-in with Old King Hamlet, finds himself cornered between Juliet and Lady Macbeth, who both seem to be requesting for Deadpool to help them with their own selected plot points. For instance, Juliet, lamenting over Romeo's disappearance, recounts to Deadpool:

Juliet: I am his Juliet, his maiden true. We once did meet upon my balcony, where I said,
"Wherefore art thou Romeo?"

Deadpool: Didst thou not know thy lover's whereabouts?

Lady Macbeth: Nay, brigand: this word "wherefore" meaneth "why."

Deadpool [turning to the viewer]: See? Comic books are educational.

[...]

Juliet: Say, wilt thou help?

Deadpool: And **wherefore** should I so? Already my vocabulary groweth!⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Gerzic, 74.

⁷⁹ Doescher and Oliveira, 16-17.

While the dialogue presents itself in a light, unserious tone, Doescher is actually working on a number of levels here. For one, he humorously illustrates a particularly confusing detail of Shakespeare's language when Deadpool mixes-up the use of the word "wherefore" with the meaning of the word "where." By highlighting this, Doescher offers a nod to the confusing nature of Shakespeare's overall language in his plays – it can look one way but mean something else. To add, Deadpool's direct address to the reader – "See? Comic books are educational" – hints at both the educational purpose behind Doescher's work as well as a clue-in to the reader to pay extra attention to what is being said. Deadpool, in pulling the reader's attention to him, ensures that when he uses the word "wherefore" in its proper form a few sentences later, the reader is both aware and ready for it. Deadpool's use of breaking the fourth wall allows for him not only to communicate with his reader, but to teach them something as well. It is also important to note that the reader, while being taught the confusing nature of Shakespeare's language, is not being patronized here. Deadpool learns the language *with* the student. The reader is pulled into the comic as a complicit companion to Deadpool, one who is also taught how to use these archaic phrases. In bringing the reader down to his level, Deadpool is capable of keeping a student's attention, in order to teach them the proper way to "read" Shakespeare.

And while the co-learning is important between Deadpool and the student, another way Deadpool builds this role for the reader as co-conspirator is through his use of violence, gore, and the obscene. Given the amount of violence the reader witnesses (due to Deadpool's antics) it also could be seen as if the reader is then a witness of his violence, complicit with Deadpool's story and violent acts. Surprisingly, this is important as violence and gore can often lend itself to garnering a certain amount of appeal within pedagogy – especially in the eyes of high school-aged students. Kerry Mallan, as quoted in Gerzic's work, "argues that grossness as a popular

channel for humor in literature targeted at young readers, originates in their desire to ‘break away from adult codes of acceptable behavior.’ The gross and forbidden is a teasing of defiant behavior.”⁸⁰ In other words, in giving students something that breaks from what is typically understood as “acceptable,” students are encouraged to develop themselves within a complicit role in the story. Gerzic attributes this ideology to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory surrounding the idea of “carnival,” a period of time and celebration directly after the Catholic holiday of Lent. He “characterizes the carnivalesque spirit, therefore, as a form of popular humor which encourages the temporary crossing of boundaries: where fools become wise, kings become beggars, heaven becomes hell, fact and fantasy are interchanged, and there is a leveling of differences between people as their shared humanity, the body, becomes the subject of crude humor (with a focus on the grotesque body and excess).”⁸¹ In other words, the idea of “carnival,” as defined by Bakhtin, encouraged the crossing of boundaries, not just transgressing of bodies, but also transgressions against authority. Carnival offered a liminal space in which the law could be broken and defiance against the norm was the expectation.

In a similar way, Deadpool’s manifestation both as a character and as a figure in this Shakespearean world seems to take on this idea of Bakhtin’s carnival. Within this Shakespearean world, Deadpool represents a chaotic presence, but a chaotic presence that means to instill order through chaos. The epic climax to Doescher’s story finds Deadpool utilizing this chaotic, ruinous violence to place the events of the tragedies back in order:

⁸⁰ Kerry Mallan, *Laugh Lines: Exploring Humor in Children’s Literature* (Newtown: Primary English Teaching Association, 1993). Mallan is quoted here by Gerzic, 70.

⁸¹ Gerzic, 70. Gerzic is summarizing Bakhtin’s main points here, but a more informative perspective of his theory can be found in his work, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).



Figure 3: Bruno Oliveira, “Deadpool beheads Lear.”

For instance, after studying the plots of the original plays, Deadpool decides to take the vengeance of Cordelia into his own hands. As seen in the above panel,⁸² Deadpool cuts off the head of King Lear in a fury of movement and gore. As one would expect of such scene, Bruno Olivera’s art has, indeed, made the image particularly graphic. The thick lines of motion, marked by inky, jet-black marks coming from Deadpool’s double swords, are marred with splotches of red from the blood of Lear’s headless injury. Colorist Nick Filardi has emphasized the dramatic movement happening in the picture by lightening the center of the image with a pale, golden color scheme, while the borders of the image are marked by darker beige, orange, and golden tones. However, while the scene contains graphic imagery, the audience does not get the sense that this is “bad” violence. It is a violence that is meant to instill order, chaos to settle what needs to be proper and tragically “settled.” As Deadpool remarks, as he finishes off his dramatic killing

⁸² Bruno Oliveira, “Deadpool beheads Lear,” in Marvel Comics *Deadpool Does Shakespeare* (New York: Marvel Comics), 55.

of the king, “Tis tit for tat. Or rather, head for head.”⁸³ And if the point is not clear, Deadpool is quick to point out, this violent killing (and the others that swiftly follow) is not so different from Shakespeare’s own endings of his tragedies. As in one of the final pages, Deadpool remarks, “A perfect end for Shakespeare’s tragedies: full many bodies dead upon the stage.”⁸⁴ Remarkably self-aware as always, Deadpool acknowledges his violence is not uncommon for a tragedy written by Shakespeare. In creating this violent, but chaotic link between Shakespeare and himself, Deadpool allows for the reader to see the common connection between the two: Shakespeare also can transgress boundaries through violence – it is not only the “role” of Deadpool. With that in mind, while Deadpool takes the reader for a trip through funny, edgy, but transgressing violence, he also ensures that the reader understands that this also within the understandings of Shakespeare.⁸⁵

⁸³ Doescher and Oliveira, 55.

⁸⁴ Doescher and Oliveira, 56.

⁸⁵ Oliveira, “The end of the tragedy,” in Marvel Comics *Deadpool Does Shakespeare* (New York: Marvel Comics), 56.



Figure 4: Bruno Oliveira, “The end of the tragedy,”

That being said, when we consider the violence that Deadpool also attributes to being “the end” of most of Shakespeare’s tragedies, it not only calls into question what we consider “Shakespeare,” but it also lightens the literary “weight” that Shakespeare possesses. Shakespeare is often seen as large and looming in terms of his literary importance, but Shakespeare *also* contains gratuitous violence, edgy humor, and a certain candid self-awareness. While Deadpool

seeks to make Shakespeare seem less “Shakespeare,” he also hints that Shakespeare and his textual language is malleable, and perhaps, misunderstood in some cases. While the comic book is not emblematic of everything important to Shakespeare’s text, it opens the possibility of “re”-discovering fresh and exciting meaning when reading and analyzing these early modern texts. This is why *Deadpool* offers such an interesting spin on Shakespeare – he both reaffirms what we understand of the Bard, while also reminding us that chaos, carnival, and “edginess” can exist within him as well. As *Deadpool* asks the audience, after Lady Macbeth has unsuccessfully attempted to seduce him utilizing actual quotes from *Macbeth*: “Did Shakespeare really write such racy stuff?”⁸⁶ *Deadpool* reminds us that Shakespeare is inappropriate and often times, downright insensitive to what is decidedly “proper.” But as Gerzic and Mallan noted above, that is what is appealing to secondary level education students. *Deadpool* is more than capable of critiquing Shakespeare, but he also reminds us that Shakespeare is more than willing to bring himself down to his reader’s level.

And perhaps the most qualifying reason why *Deadpool Does Shakespeare* offers the possibility of posing as a new “introduction” to Shakespeare is due to its ability to offer both Shakespeare “miming” as well as “Shakespeare memes,” as coined by Kristen Denslow in her article, “Guest Starring Hamlet: The Proliferation of the Shakespeare Meme on American Television.”⁸⁷ The Shakespeare “meme,” as defined by Denslow, is an “identifiable narrative unit that can be isolated within the text and considered across many texts” such as *Romeo and Juliet*’s “star-crossed lovers” trope.⁸⁸ Denslow looks at several different TV shows within

⁸⁶ Doescher and Oliveira, 19.

⁸⁷ Kristen N. Denslow, “Guest Starring *Hamlet*: The Proliferation of the Shakespeare Meme on American Television,” in *Shakespeare / Not Shakespeare*, eds. Christy Desmet, Natalie Loper, and Jim Casey (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 97-110.

⁸⁸ Denslow, 98.

American broadcasting such as *Sons of Anarchy*, *Gossip Girl*, and *Lost* to show that Shakespeare “memes” – whether or not they are directly descended from Shakespeare – can have different meanings when they are mashed up against Shakespeare’s dramatic texts. That said, Denslow makes note that “a meme that ‘sticks’ has three qualities: copying-fidelity, fecundity, and longevity.”⁸⁹ In having “fecundity” and “longevity,” Denslow means the meme is still visible even after hundreds of years, across thousands of texts, and a myriad of different formats. For instance, while Shakespeare was not the first writer to play with the idea of “star-crossed lovers,” we still see this “meme” across many forms of media today. Looking at how modern media such as TV shows (and in this case, graphic novels) can be directly tied to Shakespeare, allows us to make connections where there may be none visible. In the vein of Denslow’s way of thinking, I take it a step further in the idea of Shakespearean “miming” or “posturing.” Classic performances of Shakespeare have given us certain poses and imagery that is evoked within Shakespeare such as Hamlet’s hoisting of Yorick’s skull into the air or the wishful “Where for art thou, Romeo?” of Juliet’s balcony scene. These “postures” and “echoes” are often seen and, in most cases, often expected of Shakespeare within performance and adaptation. Even if Shakespeare did not necessarily give us any indication that there is a specific posture or imagery of performance within his texts, there are certain “iconic” images that cause us to identify it as Shakespearean. This suggests that Shakespeare has accrued these famous postures, mimes, and images from a long cultural lineage of audiences, readers, and interpretations of performers who have seared these images as the “status quo” into our Shakespearean imagination.

Deadpool has several of these “posturing” Shakespeare memes. The first identifiable one comes from the cover image of the comic, penciled by Marvel artist Mike Mayhew. The cover

⁸⁹ Denslow, 99.

sees Deadpool seemingly drawn in his classic red-and-black costume, but upon closer inspection, one can gather it is a 16th Century-styled get-up complete with a ruff collar, puffy sleeves, and button-down wear.⁹⁰ And to top it all off, he holds up a skull with his left hand, looking down on it as if he is contemplating a great existential crisis. However, while we recognize Deadpool's "Shakespearean-ness" within this image, we are reminded of the character's constant self-awareness within this world as he holds a particularly dangerous-looking gun to the skull. To add, he is also wearing a belt that has a collection of bombs, a cannister of explosives, and other ammo. Obviously, Deadpool's not meant to fool anyone into being a real Shakespearean "actor," but the echo and "memeing" of Shakespeare is there in this image. A clear connection from Deadpool, a character written in the early 1990s, to the early modern performances of Shakespeare is drawn and illustrated in broad strokes within this image. The Shakespeare posturing does not stop there, as another clearer "Shakespearean" image is evoked within the comic book itself when, after a series of mishaps and a nasty run-in with King Lear, Deadpool's head is cut-off. However, because of Deadpool's miraculous healing factor (a gift from his comic book origins), as well as the dark humor behind his creators, this sort of thing doesn't "kill" Deadpool, but rather opens up his margin of humor to gory explication. We see Deadpool, after losing his head in *Sleepy Hollow*-esque fashion, holding it dramatically into the air, echoing Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948) with near-identical imagery.⁹¹

⁹⁰ It should be noted, however, Deadpool's clothing and garments are not actually historically accurate to the early modern era's typical dress. Deadpool wears a pair of "pumpkin pants" and knee-high boots, two pieces of clothing which date back to the Victorian period's illustration of Tudor clothing and garb.

⁹¹ Oliveira, "Alas, poor Deadpool!," in Marvel Comics *Deadpool Does Shakespeare* (New York: Marvel Comics), 32-33.



Figure 5: Bruno Oliveira, "Alas, poor Deadpool!"

Besides the particularly striking echo of Shakespearean posturing here, there is also another aspect worth considering: the two-page spread format of the comic book itself. In comics, when there is a particularly powerful event, battle, or epic action sequence that is meant to connote the importance and the story's impetus, comic book creators will often utilize what is called a "two-page spread." The aforementioned scene of Deadpool's lost head is drawn out as a two-page spread – Deadpool is captured in a dominant position, with the viewer forced to look up at him in the frame, while his body is angled to take up most of the page space. This is intentional. Just as Hamlet, in many performances, has famously angled the skull of Yorick to level with his own face, Deadpool too has angled his own "talking head" to be leveled with the spot where his head should be. The posturing aside of Deadpool's body, the meaning is clear here: we are meant to see an "echo" of Hamlet's famous speech within this two-page spread. And perhaps, mockingly so. In Shakespeare's original work, Hamlet holds the decrypt skull of his favorite court jester, Yorick, while Deadpool holds his own "talking head." The effect is not only funny, but perhaps mocking of Hamlet's dramatic existential musings. As Hamlet laments,

I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times, and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. —Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chop-fallen?⁹²

Hamlet utilizes Yorick's skull as a point of morbid imagination. Not only was he a "fellow of infinite jest," but a man once made of flesh – "here hung those lips," which are now mocked by the skull's "chapfallen" grinning. Deadpool's own "Yorick speech" is meant to echo Hamlet, but also to mock his dramatic morbid imagination. While Hamlet ventriloquizes the story of Yorick's "excellent fancy," Deadpool's own head "speaks" for him as he theorizes a plot to

⁹² William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Norton Shakespeare 2nd Edition, New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2008). 5.1.170-178.

escape this Shakespearean world he has fallen into. As he poetically waxes into the air, “Alas, poor Deadpool – thou art fubbar’d quite!”⁹³ Hamlet utilizes Yorick as a method to speak of the despair and eventual ruin of man, while Deadpool uses the chaotic element of losing his own head to plan for the future. This is not only funny, but it is exactly the type of “humbling” of Shakespeare’s grandiosity we can expect from Deadpool.

This Shakespearean posturing, as exhibited by a comic book character like Deadpool, also touches on an idea Brandon Christopher discusses in his work on graphic and visual narratives in Shakespeare.⁹⁴ Christopher discusses the idea of comic books utilizing Shakespeare to “legitimize” themselves. But more than that, Christopher describes this phenomenon as comic book creators pinpointing what they define as distinctly “Shakespearean,” before they themselves incorporate this handpicked “distinctness” into their own work. In his own article Christopher utilizes an example of Dennis O’Neil’s famous 1970s *Batman* run in which the title implicates *Hamlet*: “And Be a Villain!”⁹⁵ The familiar posturing and memeing of Shakespeare is clear – O’Neil means to make the connection that Batman’s dramatic, gothic darkness can be related to the atmosphere and meaning of some of Shakespeare’s greatest tragedies. But, in my opinion, some of comic book creators’ eagerness to make connections to Shakespeare is probably due to the general idea of comic books and graphic novels being “self-conscious” of themselves as pieces worthy of literary study; if they utilize what is understood to be “Shakespeare,” then they become elevated and worthy of deeper literary study. It is worth noting, however, that Deadpool is *not* self-conscious of himself, but rather sees himself on par

⁹³ Doescher and Oliveira, 33.

⁹⁴ Brandon Christopher, “Paratextual Shakespearings: Comics’ Shakespearean Frame,” in *Shakespeare / Not Shakespeare*, eds. Christy Desmet, Natalie Loper, and Jim Casey (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2013), 149-167.

⁹⁵ Denny O’Neil, Irv Novick, and Dick Giordano, “And Be a Villain!” *Detective Comics* #418 (December 1971), 1. O’Neil is quoting Hamlet’s speech after his ghost father begs him to “remember” him (1.5.91).

with Shakespeare. Because while Deadpool may poke fun at Shakespeare and his iconicism, he is also quick to actualize his own status as a literary symbol just like that of Shakespeare and his legendary texts. “If this is living in a book,” he begins in his final speech, “back on my world I shall never look. Forsooth, why should it cause me strife to live mine antihero’s life within these pages bound, confin’d—? My words sprung from an author’s mind, page margins as my sole frontiers—I’ve done so more than 20 years! From comic book to Shakespeare play, I am thy Deadpool; here I’ll stay.”⁹⁶ While Deadpool was reluctant to accept his unstable positioning within this Shakespearean world, he now seems to have found his place within it. Refreshingly, as we end the comic, we come to find that there is some sense of stability with Deadpool. After all, he has existed – whether “comic book to Shakespeare play” – for more than 20 years. He has constancy, but not only that, a budding literary legacy in his own right. 20 years may not be much compared to the four centuries of Shakespeare’s own literary tradition, but Deadpool has proven he can exist *within* Shakespeare’s world just the same.

I would argue, therefore, that *Deadpool Does Shakespeare* should be a new “introduction” to Shakespeare for high school students. While it is written in iambic pentameter, and therefore, not completely bereft of early modern language, it does show that his text (and the Elizabethan English) is movable and malleable. Doescher, within this graphic novel, challenges the language in innovative ways, not just in the act of “killing” Shakespeare (literally), but also because he reworks the form of a Shakespeare play and utilizes a new, likable character to typify the tropes and motifs of Shakespeare’s tragedies. There is also the fact that Doescher has gone to great lengths to recontextualize “the world” of Shakespeare, in utilizing bits and pieces of Northrop Frye’s “green world” ideology so that liminal adventure is possible as is the act of

⁹⁶ Doescher and Oliveira, 58.

learning. But perhaps more importantly, Deadpool sees his worth up against Shakespeare: he recognizes that he too can stand amongst the legacy of what Shakespeare means to a cultural legacy at large. Using this graphic novel as an introduction to Shakespeare, students will learn to see Shakespeare not simply as a new cultural figure within their education, but as a “punk” icon. In dialogue with Deadpool, Shakespeare has the potential to go from being a highly respected artifact of literary culture to an inappropriate, violent, and at times, *vulgar* piece of literature. And while that may not be as appealing to critical circles, to young students, looking for a co-conspirator to navigate the confusing, textual maze of Shakespeare’s early modern language, it makes all the difference. Deadpool assures students that there is nothing to fear of Shakespeare and his grandiose language – the Bard is on their level, and he’s no scarier than a comic book goofball in tights.

SHE LIES WITH ANGELS: A SHAKESPEARE “MIDDLE GROUND”

While *Deadpool Does Shakespeare* can act as a “new” entryway to Shakespeare due to Deadpool’s hyper-awareness and the comic book’s amalgamation of Shakespearean tragedy topos, it resists being a fully “adapted” text of Shakespeare. Deadpool’s comic possesses a certain mutually exclusive intertextuality – both Shakespeare’s referenced texts within the comic world, as well as Deadpool’s comic storyline, mutually benefit one another. Deadpool can exist within the Shakespearean world, while Shakespeare can face decentralizing, light-hearted criticism from Deadpool. However, Deadpool walks the line in being fully immersed in Shakespeare – he adopts iambic pentameter as his language, comments on the important plot points of Shakespeare’s tragedies, but his own storyline within the comic does not center on the retelling of a specific play. Chuck Austen and Salvador Laroca’s retelling of *Romeo and Juliet* in their *Uncanny X-Men* comic, *She Lies With Angels*, is a vivid rendition of the classic tragedy, with the exception that the story is retold within the context of Marvel Comics’ X-Men characters and story world. For this reason, I define this graphic novel adaptation as a Shakespeare “adjacent” or a Shakespearean “middle text,” rather than an introduction to Shakespeare such as *Deadpool Does Shakespeare*. The story of *She Lies With Angels* is rooted in the contextual backdrop of the Marvel Comics Universe, but the distinct plot and tragic end of the two main characters – who take the place of Romeo and Juliet – are reflective of Shakespeare’s central plot. Shakespeare’s play then becomes housed within the world of the

comic. In other words, within *She Lies With Angels* there is a distinct shift from Shakespeare, to the point where there is noticeable difference between Shakespeare's world and the story world. This is, indeed, a retelling of *Romeo and Juliet* that can parallel the play, but it also develops an original story in a different, already established world outside of the understanding of Shakespeare.

While the graphic novel is written in contemporary English, it acts as a good comparative piece to the actual play formula itself, as it mirrors all five acts of Shakespeare's play in that each individual comic book within the collection stands in for an "act" of the play. However, the graphic novel also demonstrates a capacity to keep readers guessing in how it will develop in comparison to the original story. Within the graphic novel, there are a myriad of conflicts with the original text – twists and turns that both interfere with the original storyline of *Romeo and Juliet* and set the retelling up for a modern conversation with Shakespeare. With this in mind, it is almost necessary that this text is read alongside Shakespeare's own. The tension between the events of the original play text, and those of the comic, pose an interesting comparison for readers. This graphic novel, reminiscent of Deadpool's textual awareness to Shakespeare, acknowledges its readers are aware of the storyline of *Romeo and Juliet*. Each "event" of the comic becomes a constant reflexive act – what "events" match up with the play versus those events that differ? These changes and conflicts with the original storyline pose interesting further questions: What is left over? What has changed? And better yet, *why* has it changed? While the comic book may harken back to Shakespeare, it finds "newness" and reinvention in its pages that mean to develop a conversation between the early modern and the contemporary issues of civil polarization and the lines of tension between them.

Moreover, the “space” and history of the X-Men retelling is particularly striking due to the fact that the X-Men have long been a franchise within the comics world that stands-in for the “minority” demographics of contemporary American life. In 1963, with the original publishing of the comics line, *Uncanny X-Men*, written and drawn by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, it was directly at the tail-end of the McCarthy-era communist hearings of HUAC (House of Un-American Activities Committee). With suspicion rife and distrust in American citizenry at record highs, it was also the time of the tumultuous Civil Rights protests and revolution that had blossomed across the country over the course of the past decade. These events sent shockwaves through an already increasingly suspicious and polarized country, which unsettled the way American politics and life proceeded for decades. Lee and Kirby seem to have made no mistake in publishing their comics in a time of such civil upheaval and strife as “mutants,” the main characters of X-Men storylines, were known as ousted, distrustful members of society due to the fact that their genetically “mutated” super-powered abilities were often seen as a threat to the commonplace life of American society. Joseph Darowski, *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor: Race and Gender in the Comic Books*, has studied the 50-year-long history of the series *Uncanny X-Men* with its numerous writers, artists, and creators, all of whom used the “mutant metaphor” to communicate the tensions of minority groups within society.⁹⁷ For instance, Darowski points out that Lee and Kirby, writing in a time of racial and civil strife, utilized the mutant metaphor differently than writer Chris Claremont, who composed the series largely within the AIDS crisis of the mid-1980s. And while many modern writers of the X-Men have shifted away from this rhetoric (as white, cis-gendered, and often straight teenagers standing in for the systemically oppressed people of America, does not seem to bode well in contemporary contexts), mutants

⁹⁷ Joseph J. Darowski, *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor: Race and Gender in the Comic Books*, Rowman and Littlefield (2014).

have come to represent the “idea” of minority.⁹⁸ There have been plenty of studies done on the “queerness” of X-Men stories as often mutants have to “come out” to their parents about their mutation and/or special ability.⁹⁹ That said, the mutants often “come out” at an early age as their mutations manifest around the time of puberty, often in physical displays of advanced abilities or a visible mutation on their bodies. The X-Men, a superhero team like that of the Avengers or DC’s Justice League, is composed of these exiled members of society, who fight for not only equality of mutants, but for peace between humanity and mutant kind.

When applying this historical background to Austen and Laroca’s *She Lies With Angels*, a graphic novel composed of the 5-issue comic arc (including issues #437-441) during their *Uncanny X-Men* run, Josh Guthrie, a teenage mutant (noted by his giant pink fluffy wings), and Julia Cabot, a human teenage girl, find themselves in a similar situation of human fear versus mutant power. The first comic in the collection opens with a familiar “first act”: two groups of teenage boys – whom we quickly come to identify as members of the two contentious families of the story, the Cabots and the Guthries – are in the midst of mocking one another, when the tense situation quickly spirals into an “electric” confrontation. Jedediah “Jeb” Guthrie, joined by one of the token Black characters of the comic, Raymond Jr., has seemingly just developed his own mutant abilities and rises to defend himself when Abraham Cabot declares Guthrie’s family “full

⁹⁸ Because Stan Lee and Jack Kirby were both of Jewish heritage and the sons of immigrants, they were fairly familiar with the idea of being a “minority” in mid-20th Century American society. Lee even invented the mutant slur “mutie” to stand-in for slangs against other minority groups. Furthermore, Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (2005), in studying the origins of comic book superheroes, has observed that Lee and Kirby’s stories are not entirely unique to many comic book writers of this era. Many of these caped and masked crusaders, predominantly created in the early 1940s, were the work of many Jewish artists and writers. Inevitably because of their immigrant parentage and Jewish heritage, often these artists were confronted with the reality of being socialized outcasts within society. Jones, in tracing the accounts of these creators’ lives and careers, theorizes that it was this marginalization, however, that enabled them to intimately understand the hopes, disappointments, and idealizations of American life to funnel directly into the comic book superhero.

⁹⁹ Darowski has also edited *The Ages of the X-Men: Essays on the Children of the Atom in Changing Times* (2014), which contains essays that address topics surrounding the “mutant metaphor” as well as the generalized effort of “mutant diversity” and “queerness” within comic books.

of muties.”¹⁰⁰ Blue, electrical fire engulfs Cabot as Guthrie, unmasking his mutant abilities, threatens the rest of the Cabots’: “You wanna mess with my friends?”¹⁰¹ The somewhat ineffective human sheriff, Pete, quickly cuts in between both groups as he tries to mitigate the situation, but instead of pacifying the boys, he ends up shooting Guthrie in the shoulder.

The scene’s layout in the actual comic book is cut by back-to-back, identically sized panels to emphasize the tense back-and-forth between the two groups. Larroca, known for his expert design in crafting realistic faces and expressions of his characters, has spent extra time focusing on facial expressions within this particular scene. Jeb Guthrie’s blue electric fire that shoots out of his eyes, due to his mutation, seems mobile and emotive due to the glossy, life-like eyes that Larroca has emphasized in Guthrie’s expression. We can *see* the rage while it blossoms across Jeb’s expression as he unveils his power to the unaware Cabots. Taking all of this into account, we come to understand this scene is not only a call back to Act 1, Scene 1 of *Romeo and Juliet*, but it also gives us vivid visualization of the emotions, characters, and tension between these two groups. The mutation that Jeb Guthrie possesses is not only a visual indication of his difference in comparison to the human characters of the story, but a symbol of the tense fracture that exists between these two groups. When read alongside Shakespeare, the audience can better understand how this “familiar” tension that exists between the Montagues and the Capulets can be visualized, dangerous, and explosive. These families are not simply enemies, but two completely *different* kinds of creatures who are both out to seek the other’s destruction.

Moreover, when compared against the inciting conflict of Act 1, Scene 1 of *Romeo and Juliet*, where the petty mockery between Samson, Gregory, and Abraham, quickly spirals into a tense sword standoff between the three men, along with Tybalt and Benvolio, we recognize the

¹⁰⁰ Charles Austen and Salvador Larroca, *She Lies With Angels* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2004), 4.

¹⁰¹ Austen and Larroca, 11.

familiar indications of conflict between these two factions. The scene begins fairly mildly, but switches into threatening territory once swords are drawn:

Abraham Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?

Samson I do bite my thumb, sir.

Abraham Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?

Samson [to Gregory] Is the law of our side if I say ‘Ay’?

Gregory No.

[...]

Enter Benvolio

Gregory Say ‘better.’ Here comes one of my master’s kinsmen.

[...]

Samson Draw, if you be men. Gregory, remember thy washing blow.

They [draw and] fight

Benvolio [drawing] Part, fools. Put up your swords. You know not what you do.

Enter Tybalt

Tybalt [drawing] What, art thou drawn among these heartless hinds?

Turn thee, Benvolio. Look upon thy death.¹⁰²

Abraham, Samson, and Gregory merely begin to poke and prod at one another with obscene gestures and mockery, but it is still conflict, and the tension of these two warring factions of family exists between the three men. Once Benvolio enters, drawing his sword in an attempt to mitigate the tension through threat of his own intervening violence, Tybalt escalates the situation even further by declaring to Benvolio: “Look upon thy death.” Taking account of this scene, we note that tension and conflict are what drives the forces of aggression, violence, and competition within this play. Mere mockery is dangerous in this instance as it can become something far worse in only a matter of lines, but what’s more is that conflict – no matter the size – breeds more conflict. Gregory and Samson’s teasing of Abraham leads directly into the death threats of Benvolio and Tybalt. This tension that runs through the play, acting as an apparatus of sorts, functions as the impetus for the story. After all, that would explain why the reasoning for the families’ fraction is never elucidated – it is simply understood as “Two households, both alike in

¹⁰² William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Norton Shakespeare 2nd Edition, New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2008), 1.1.39-43, 53, 55-60.

dignity / [...] / From ancient grudge break to new mutiny, / Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.”¹⁰³ The tension of these two families is rooted within their common history – it does not need to be examined; it simply *is*. That said, this tension can be both the cause for petty mockery between side characters as well as the cause for death between the two young lovers of the play.

With this in mind, turning back to the opening scene of *She Lies With Angels*, the mutation of Jeb Guthrie – and the other mutations the mutants have within the story – acts as a similar apparatus to this original civil “tension” in Shakespeare’s text. Mutations are cause for common mockery between teenage boys, but once it is “unsheathed” (like Tybalt’s sword), in its raw and untamed form, it is deadly as it is dangerous. When analyzing these two examples side-by-side, it seems as if there is no good way to divorce these two texts from one another. *Romeo and Juliet* is further amplified by *She Lies With Angels* in giving the underlying fractional “tension” of the play physical extremity and danger, while the comic seems to rely on the original conflict of the play to tell its story. Therefore, we seem to come to a liminal, middle ground between the two texts. Given that Chuck Austen wrote the script of the comic with the play in mind, it is hard to separate the fact that the comic’s story was conceived with the purpose to “retell” Shakespeare’s version.

That said, examining this idea of conflict and tension between the two groups, both in the comic book and the play, is also beneficial to secondary level education. Sue Gregory, an instructor of high school-aged students in the UK,¹⁰⁴ did an extensive study in her own classroom by utilizing Baz Luhrman’s *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) to flesh out how civil conflict between groups of people can be educational and worth further exploration. As she writes, “It seems more

¹⁰³ Ibid, Prologue, 1, 3-4.

¹⁰⁴ Sue Gregory, “Making Shakespeare our contemporary: teaching *Romeo and Juliet* at Key Stage Three,” in *Shakespeare in Education*, ed. Martin Blocksidge (London: Continuum, 2003).

necessary than ever that children appreciate from as young an age as possible what happens if two children, two adults, two households, two countries, two religions, two races, two ideologies cannot accommodate each other.”¹⁰⁵ Just as Gerzic and Mallan discussed in my last section on the importance of involving gore and suggestive complicity within Shakespeare, Gregory brings in a new and interesting point within educational circles: distrust in the Other. Gregory sees conflict between two groups – such as those posed in *Romeo and Juliet* – as a reason to explore two sides of an argument, analyze the problem, and progress to a more well-rounded understanding of said-conflict. However, it cannot simply be a matter of studying the play, but rather more of an opportunity to give students an understanding that “studying *Romeo and Juliet* is relevant, [and] indeed important, to their growing knowledge of the world.”¹⁰⁶ In order to show students that Shakespeare is “indeed important,” Gregory leans towards contextualizing Shakespeare’s text with Lührman’s *Romeo + Juliet*. Eager to use the adaptation as a point of exploration into civil conflict and strife, Gregory stressed the use of modern images paired alongside the play’s themes. She encouraged her students to recontextualize the play alongside visualizations in their own understandings. Taking this into account, her students brought in news articles, poetry, cultural artifacts, magazine clippings, and popular advertisements to weave together the understanding of civil, societal opposition on a complex scale. In utilizing Lührman’s adaptation to contextualize civil conflict, Gregory was not only able to encourage her students to look at the Iraq War, post-9/11 terrorism anxiety, and ideological divides with the Middle East, but also to frame it within the lens of Shakespeare’s own *Romeo and Juliet*.

In a similar fashion, *She Lies With Angels* can be used as a middle, liminal ground – caught between its own comic book world and that of Shakespeare’s – for this particular kind of

¹⁰⁵ Gregory, 21.

¹⁰⁶ Gregory, 22.

exploration into civil strife and suspicion. I find this most clearly in the way in which “fear,” a driving force for both humans and mutants, is explored within the graphic novel. While this still is the traditional love story between Romeo (Josh) and Juliet (Julia), it is also a story of how fear can be radicalized and centralized within a community. After his fight with Jeb Guthrie, Abraham “Abe” Cabot, unlike Jeb who is shot in the shoulder, is minorly burned by Guthrie’s mutation and power, but his father, the patriarch of the Cabot family (who’s not given a first name), decides to take matters into his own hands. Taking Sheriff Pete with him, Cabot reveals he means to use some kind of high-tech armor, reminiscent of some kind of futuristic suit, to go after the Guthrie family himself. In the two-page spread below – a sign of the scene’s imminent significance – the viewer is given the image of Cabot and Sheriff Pete looking over a high-tech industrial complex where a group of scientists seems to be working on something large, red, and distinctly robotic. And while we’re not entirely sure what the mechanism is at first, as Cabot insidiously implies to Sheriff Pete, “[It] has the power to kill just about anything.”¹⁰⁷ This language, coupled beside the image, is striking as it is foreboding:

¹⁰⁷ Austen and Larroca, 41-42. Larroca, “Weapons of mass destruction,” in *She Lays With Angels* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2004), 41-42.



Figure 6: Salvador Larroca, "Weapons of mass destruction."

The scene is outlined by dark colors that hide most of the background in shadowy, murky shades – we’re not meant to see all of it, but what we see is enough to know it is damning. Because while the complex is shrouded under the guise of night, it is a lively space. There are scientists working on both sides of page on Cabot’s weapons, while a heavy-duty construction plow works to clear debris. Working under the guise of night, Cabot’s weapons and his menacing words cannot be a particularly good sign for the rest of the characters of the graphic novel. Just as Jeb Guthrie’s mutation, in the opening scene of the comic, was meant to give us a sense of the masked tension that beats beneath the surface of the story, this scene that Cabot shows us (and Sheriff Pete), leaves us with a lingering sense of dread. Given both the beginning scene and the aforementioned industrial complex, we now see the two dynamics at work within the story: the underlying tension that exists between the humans and the mutants, as well as the pervading sense of fear. While the mutants, like Jeb Guthrie, have come to use their mutation to lash out in self-defense, some of the humans, like Cabot, have radicalized their fear into something mechanical and weaponized.

Though some mutants, like the X-Men, have turned their fear of humans into a form of heroic action in trying to bring change to both groups, Cabot puts forth a dangerous brand of misunderstanding – militarized, armored, and unbridgeable prejudice against mutants. The effect is quite polarizing. Cabot does not see a solution to his own fear as he sees the only path to protection of his family through violence. As many of us can recognize, this tone that Cabot strikes is particularly close to our own contemporary moment in American society. The nation is divided by two civil sides and many “fear” the threat of what “the other side” believes. In a time when we must teach our students to recognize two sides of an argument with the utmost caution, *She Lies With Angels*, alongside *Romeo and Juliet*, become clear texts to utilize as a point of

understanding the outcomes of violent, civil divisions. Steve Mentz, speaking more on behalf of performances of Shakespeare rather than “pop” adaptations, emphasizes the need that “young men and women [must learn to recognize] that cruel old stories need better and more just endings.”¹⁰⁸ Cabot’s building a high-tech dangerous suit of armor, capable of killing mutants, is not a sign of strength, but rather a sign of radicalized fear. In giving students this text, in conversation with *Romeo and Juliet*, students can come to recognize Cabot’s radical fear is out of misunderstanding mutants’ existence, rather than careful and cautious actions of thought.

Moreover, if we argue that these texts can be utilized as spaces to explore polarization between two civil groups of society as well as radicalization of fear and tension, then we must “rethink” how the ending of both the play and the graphic novel illustrate the tragedy of this vast, complicated split of two sides. While in the original text Romeo and Juliet die because of a massively frustrating case of miscommunication, the underlying tension that rests within the apparatus of *Romeo and Juliet* also plays a part in the deaths of the two young lovers. Just as mere mockery can turn into a lethal swordfight, so can innocent young love turn into a messy murder-suicide. But in this current American era of mass fear and polarization, it is not hard to see how dangerous miscommunication and misunderstood opinions can have lasting physical impacts on civil society. Because these social and political situations are so delicately balanced within not only this play, but in this contemporary moment, it is not entirely surprising that innocent people, caught in the crossfire, die as a result. This can be clearly seen at the climatic end of issue #439 within *She Lies With Angels*, which showcases Cabot’s radicalized fear as he dons the mutant-killing armor and aggressively invades on Josh and Julia’s private union:

¹⁰⁸ Steve Mentz, “Failing with Shakespeare: Political Pedagogy in Trump’s America,” in *Teaching Social Justice Through Shakespeare: Why Renaissance Literature Matters Now*, eds. Hillary Eklund and Wendy Beth Hyman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 139.



Figure 7: Salvador Larroca, "Interrupted Love."

As seen in the above image, there are a number of striking things to take note of.¹⁰⁹ The first being how luscious and green the space is in which Josh and Julia appear. With the colors contrasting from deep greens to rich blues and purples, it is a colorful space as well as a peaceful one. This scene, in being a whole page of the comic, provides us with an idea of the scope of just how large this space is. Larroca has aptly positioned most of the flowers and vegetation at the very bottom of the page, making them seem so abundant that the page cannot contain them. We understand the two young lovers rest in an image that is plentiful, full of life, and blossoming with vegetation. In this way, this space given to the viewer is also reminiscent of another Shakespeare play, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, where four young lovers are thrown together in the wilderness, lost, and bewildered in dreamlike states. With Josh's giant pink, fluffy wings to distend our belief in this reality, we almost have the sense this space is dreamlike, fantastical, safe. Although perhaps visually analogous to the paradisaical biblical garden of Eden, however, the tone of Josh and Julia's union here is a bit different than Shakespeare's original meeting. Contradicting Shakespeare's version where Romeo and Juliet's meeting and subsequent relationship is particularly brief before they are married, Josh and Julia have a history. They fell in love as children but drifted apart as they got older. When they meet again in the graphic novel, they both recognize their shared past and history. That said, their meeting here is not only a meeting of two lovers, but a reunion of their past and present – a middle ground in which their love is not only rekindled but remade. Larroca's art has given this space plenty of "remaking" imagery – between all the plants and greenery, and the chameleon that is idly twisted around a nearby tree – the two lovers are not only implied to be rejoined in their love, but to be particularly "reproductive."

¹⁰⁹ Larroca, "Interrupted Love," in *She Lays With Angels* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2004), 59.

However, the colossal robot looming above an unsuspecting Josh and Julia as they are found scantily clothed, hiding within an inlet of trees, with their arms wrapped around one another in a position of both confusion and unsuspecting innocence, certainly says something much different than the lovers' reunion. One can also recognize that the towering mechanical beast is wearing the very armor that we saw in the earlier scene Cabot showed to Sheriff Pete. Coming full circle, this is the device that Cabot mentioned that has the power to kill "just about anything." Looming over them in the giant mechanical armor, with dangerous canons for arms, and a load of ammunition pointed at the two, the dreamlike vision of the two lovers is shattered by Cabot's entrance. The aforementioned "tension" that has been nestled within this story since the beginning, has reached a peak with Cabot's total weaponized retaliation against the relationship between his daughter, Julia, and the teenage mutant, Josh. With Cabot's sudden appearance and threat, the two lovers' garden of childhood innocence and romance is destroyed by the radicalization of Cabot's fear.

Moreover, this image of Josh and Julia, with their arms wrapped around one another, along with the folded pink angelic wings of Josh, signal another case of Shakespearean "posturing." This unsuspecting pose of Josh and Julia, two teenagers caught in the midst of their own affections, is not only a Shakespearean "meme," as Denslow would suggest, but a feature of a longstanding trope in romance within media: interrupted love. Most commonly used in "romcoms," this trope of interrupted love is usually showcased by two unsuspecting lovers "caught" by the surprise entrance from an unexpected character, an ex-partner, or simply a goofy interruption to the lovers' intimacy played out for the audience's amusement. With this in mind, while the image of Josh and Julia interrupted is not entirely original to the audience, the trope of "interruption" is contrasted sharply here with the entrance of Cabot's weaponized armor.

Interruptions to lovemaking are often moments of comedy and humor – a reason to playfully interrupt the lovers before they fall past the complicated threshold of “sex” – and while Cabot’s entrance signals this meme of interruption, it also utilizes this meme to showcase something far more dangerous. Cabot’s looming presence and weaponized appearance is not simply an interruption, but an imminent threat to the young lovers’ very existence. A “secret” relationship is terribly fragile even when it is humorously interrupted in throws of romantic comedy, but in the midst of weaponized fear and radicalized tension, such as that showcased by Cabot, it is under direct threat.

Though the original text of *Romeo and Juliet* does not possess anything of such dramatic, futuristic horror, such as Cabot’s robotic ammo pointed directly at Josh and Julia, the two lovers of Shakespeare’s play recognize a similar danger as a result of being “caught” and therefore, “interrupted.” Just as Josh and Julia must escape to a secret, dreamlike Edenic garden for their reunion, Romeo and Juliet fall in love when the other characters of the play are not looking (at least, not at first). Because of the civil split of their families, their love must carry on in secret. Their marriage, their consummation, and even their deaths – all powerful acts of their relationship are done in secret. It begs the question: how do Romeo and Juliet expect to exist, when their relationship is done up in secretive actions and words? Perhaps Austen and Larroca then give us the deadly image of Cabot to imply the danger to not only Josh and Julia, but to Romeo and Juliet. Cabot’s appearance in weaponized form is the actualized threat of the civil tension these two sets of lovers face. Therefore, because of the underlying “tension” of both the play and the comic book, these two sets of lovers both resort to secretive hideouts, meetings, correspondences, and of course, lovemaking. This tension, though it may have been the force that brought these young lovers together, is also the driving action that destroys all course of

happiness and love within these two texts. Taking this into account, the image of interrupted love between Josh and Julia, then becomes the splitting and unmasking of this underlying tension coming to fruition. Within this singular illustration, we have the entire play laid out before us: two lovers, acting in secret, are discovered, and their discovery means their tragic, inevitable end. This image once more proves that Shakespeare can be communicated in more than simply language, but also powerfully positioned illustrations, images, and graphic art.

That said, this is not the only case of Shakespearean posturing the play gives us. As another striking image of Josh Guthrie is given to the audience on the cover of issue #438. Josh, who can be identified as a literal “winged-poet,” throughout the text, is seen on the cover wrapped around an electric guitar, with his wings folded into shadow the rest of his body. His face is partially shrouded by the shade of a tree, but the very picture implies some form of Shakespearean artistry. The way that Josh’s body seems to be molded to the contours of the guitar, holding it close to his body, not only gives us the idea that the line between musician and mutant is blurred, but also carries the sense of cast-off, modern-day divinity. After all, in many contemporary images, angels play harps; Josh plays an electric guitar. This image almost gives us a sense of the way in which we are meant to “see” Josh, not only as the tragic Romeo figure, but also as some kind of pseudo-Christian divine being. He could be likened to a Grecian muse, while simultaneously remaining a teenage boy with wings. Furthermore, the angel imagery is quite apt here in a story where two “innocent” children are killed for the sake of their doomed romance. Josh’s wings in this image not only invoke his divine, poetic imaging, but also build into the idea of his childhood innocence.

Although this image is not specifically “Shakespeare,” and compared to *Deadpool Does Shakespeare*’s handiness in abundantly hinting at the Shakespearean images it gives the

audience, it takes some heavy-duty analysis to see *She Lies With Angels*' "Shakespearean-ness." That said, I believe that's another reason why this comic book would work well in the classroom. It inspires discussion in terms of what these striking images mean – Are they Shakespeare? What makes them so? Does it matter if they are? As similarly asked within the introduction of Casey, Desmet, and Loper's *Shakespeare / Not Shakespeare*, "How are such judgments made? What is the scale? And where is the line?" Giving students the task to determine why or why not these images appear with a certain amount of Shakespearean-ness is not simply asking them to analyze an image, but also to identify "what" about it is "Shakespeare." As I mentioned above, this text is a middle-ground of Shakespeare – it is both an independent text as well as an "rhizome" to Shakespeare's own.¹¹⁰ Pulling from both Shakespeare's text as well the "Shakespearean" images found in the graphic novel, the comic is recontextualized as a "middle space" made up of elements that are both Shakespeare and "not" Shakespeare. In this case, Shakespeare is both within and without, and his "determinedness" lies in the discussion and understanding of the students. Like Gregory mentioned earlier, allowing students to recontextualize the images they see in their own understanding, is one way in which teachers can make Shakespeare relevant to their students. In that way, they also have the chance to "re-build" a Shakespeare in their image and interpretation. And whether these images that Larroca and Austen give us are particularly "Shakespearean," does not especially matter, but the student must use the original text to understand why or how this image could strike the viewer as "Shakespeare." After all, Shakespeare is not simply a language, but also an image.

¹¹⁰ This is a reference to Lanier's "rhizomatic" theory of Shakespearean adaptation. Lanier, "Shakespearean Rhizomatics: Adaptation, Ethics, Value," in *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*, eds. Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 21.

I have discussed Shakespearean “posturing” in terms of images, but I think it is also possible to identify Shakespearean “posturing” in language. Austen has taken the time to make the language of his characters – especially the dialogue between Josh and Julia – particularly “Shakespearean” in that it is dramatic as well as hyperbolic. When Julia first sees Josh again, after years of the two not speaking, Josh is giving a small concert to a group of the town’s locals, singing a love ballad on stage. Julia, the narrator of the comic, poetically waxes that:

All these liquid harmonies stream from *his* lips, and his alone. Like a choir of angels. A choir of one. A choir whose wondrous vocals give gentle birth to sad, *silken* words of lost innocence...of unrequited love during a summer of swimming in cool, clear pools of childhood joy...of the inevitable, tragic separation of those who—in all of the world—are the only two whose passion could ever be so pure...and the hopelessness of finding such love again, in this life. He’s looking at me. And he’s singing this song to me. Please God...let him be singing this song to *me*.¹¹¹

Julia’s dramatic, but emotional monologue of wishy-washy feelings of both awe in Josh’s capacity for music as well as his tragedy of a song, strike us as another moment of “Shakespeare-ness.” She describes his voice as a “liquid harmony” that “streams from his lips,” “like a choir of angels,” who “give birth” to his “words.” Julia also notes the way in which Josh’s voice seems to reflect on a “tragic separation” from “innocent, childhood joy.” This is a direct reference to the background story between Josh and Julia, where they were childhood friends, who were eventually separated as they grew older and their families came to despise one another. This combination of the past and present, that Julia notes within Josh’s voice, is particularly interesting in that language is utilized to unify two different contexts. But more than that, however, Julia’s description of Josh’s voice is one of heightened imagery – a familiar technique of Shakespeare. In describing Josh’s voice as a “liquid harmony” and a “choir of angels,” Julia transforms his voice into something of angelic, divine beauty, perhaps something far too lovely

¹¹¹ Austen and Larroca, 24.

for that of meek human ears. There is also the fact that Julia begs for these epic “silken words” to be directed at her (“let him be singing this song to me”). It should be noted then that while this speech is a direct narration of Julia, it can also be seen as an inner monologue that is shared between her and the reader. Just as Shakespeare utilized dramatic soliloquies for characters to privately puzzle, contemplate, and ponder aloud to the listening audience, so too has Austen given Julia a private space of reflection. It is within this private sphere of the inner monologue as well as the dramatic soliloquy, that characters are allotted the ability to give physical voice to their self-contained thoughts.

This would also make sense as to why Romeo, upon first seeing Juliet at the Capulet’s party, breaks into a private soliloquy:

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
Like a rich jewel in an Ethiope’s ear;
Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!
So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows,
As yonder lady o’er her fellows shows.
The measure done, I’ll watch her place of stand,
And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand.
Did my heart love till now? forswear it, sight!
For I ne’er saw true beauty till this night.¹¹²

Romeo, seeing Juliet’s skin and complexion compared against the night sky, finds that she “teaches torches to burn bright,” shows white doves to “troop with crows,” and gives meaning to “true beauty.” In other words, she’s a real “looker,” as the saying goes, but what’s important to note is the metaphorical language and heightened imagery that is woven into Romeo’s speech as he watches Juliet move and dance through the crowds of people. He uses a total of three metaphors to describe her beauty within a single moment – this also being the same number of metaphorical “moments” that Julia uses to describe Josh’s voice (“liquid harmony,” “choir of

¹¹² Ibid, 1.5.41-50.

angels,” and “silken words”). Using metaphors to amplify the subject is a common tactic in poetry, but the dramatic form of the soliloquy allows for a more private, localized reflection of Juliet’s beauty (as well as Josh’s voice). Within the soliloquy, the character is allowed a private, but liminal space, where interaction between the audience and the speaker is possible, therefore, allowing for the unsaid and the unspeakable to be voiced. The liminal, isolated space of the soliloquy (or the dramatic inner monologue in Julia’s case) allows for the speaker to transform the subject into a transcendent, nuanced object that defies description. In this case, Juliet’s specific beauty and Josh’s ethereal voice are both capable of being described in these private, reflective moments. Marjorie Garber would explain this as a trope of the “ineffable” nature of beauty within dramatic texts – simply describing the “looks” of someone is not enough.¹¹³ Their beauty must be unequivocally, wholly indescribable; metaphors being the only way in which description is possible.

With that in mind, the metaphorical language that Julia uses to describe Josh’s voice and song is dramatically similar in both tone and reflection to the metaphorical description of Juliet within Romeo’s soliloquy. Although the comic book’s text is not written in iambic pentameter, as Doescher’s usage within *Deadpool Does Shakespeare*, this speech bears something quintessentially “Shakespeare.” It makes use of heavy dramatic images in an attempt to describe something beautiful, it’s written in the private voice of a character’s admiration for a love interest, and perhaps most importantly, it is “Shakespeare” without “the language” of Shakespeare. Therefore, Austen shows that Shakespeare’s meaning and poetic topos can be reused within a new way without the usage of Shakespeare’s poetry and “language.” That said, it

¹¹³ Marjorie Garber, “The Rest Is Silence: Ineffability and the ‘Unscene’ in Shakespeare’s Plays,” in *Ineffability: Naming the Unnamable from Dante to Beckett*, eds. Anne Howland Schotter and Peter S. Hawkins (AMS Press: 1984).

is notable that Austen does utilize Shakespeare as a source here for how he phrases Julia's observations and thoughts about Josh as she watches him perform. In using Shakespearean "imagery" in describing Josh, there is a type of ascendancy within Julia's speech. Her poeticism reminds us that the language of Shakespeare can bubble up to the surface of our own common speech, that our contemporary language is not empty of Shakespeare's own lexicon.

This mingling between Shakespeare and the "not" Shakespeare of language is particularly interesting when we consider that this graphic novel is not particularly well-liked within the comic book community. On Goodreads, the graphic novel bears the score of 2.79 out of 5 stars – not exactly a good sign in terms of "popularity." On Amazon, the graphic novel contains a slightly better rating of 3 stars out of 5, but a quick read through of the reviews will show how reluctant reviewers are to give Austen's specific graphic novel a high rating.

ComiXology, a digital comic book company owned by Amazon, also has the book averaged at 3 out of 5 stars. Obviously, perusing internet reviews of any kind of media is not always the most accurate depiction of the quality of the object, but these low-to-mid-level reviews probably have something to do with Chuck Austen, the author of not only the story arc, *She Lies With Angels*, but the entire run of *Uncanny X-Men* from 2002-2004.¹¹⁴ Austen, unfortunately, is one of the most unpopular comic book writers to date. As one reviewer put it, "So Chuck Austen [...] each volume of his run on *Uncanny X-men* has gotten, in my opinion, progressively worse to the point where I have grown to cringe whenever I see another Austen book coming up next in the chronology," or another was more concise when they simply supposed that "Chuck Austen is

¹¹⁴ Austen was the main comic book writer on *Uncanny X-Men* from 2002-2004. He wrote over 30 issues of one of Marvel's most popular comics lines. The comic arc, *She Lies With Angels*, was part of the last remaining issues that Austen focused on.

incapable of writing a halfway decent story.”¹¹⁵ However, others are fascinated with Austen’s disastrous fall during his tenure at Marvel Comics, as Chris Sims put it: “He’s one of those creators that somehow managed to rise and fall like a meteor -- and the whole thing was about as pleasant as having one dropped on your house.”¹¹⁶ This dramatic range of criticism for Austen is not entirely unfounded. Austen did write a few controversial storylines within his run on the *Uncanny X-Men* series that disconnected a lot of readers from their favorite characters in unfavorable ways.¹¹⁷ In addition, Austen was known for salacious topics within his writing, mostly due to the fact that he had a background in pornographic comic texts. To say it gracefully, Austen was not afraid to be overtly explicit in both sexual content and violence when he began writing for Marvel Comics.¹¹⁸

She Lies With Angels follows a similar theme in terms of Austen’s capacity for sexual and explicit content. There is a controversial, and a bit of an uncomfortable, out-of-place scene in which Angel, a longtime member of the X-Men,¹¹⁹ engages in sexual activity with Husk, a 19-year-old mutant teenager, while they fly off into the sky. Although nothing explicit is shown, readers of the comic have decried the relationship as well as the scene since it was first published. Angel was a member of the original X-Men team when Stan Lee and Jack Kirby originally wrote the series in 1963, and while X-Men do not “age” normally – popular comic

¹¹⁵ These are reviews taken from online, user-submitted blog and review sites – they are not necessarily “reputable.” C., “Review on *She Lies With Angels*,” Goodreads Inc., July 21, 2017. Battersea, “Chuck Austen’s third worst story,” Amazon Reviews, September 18, 2004.

¹¹⁶ Chris Sims, “Ask Chris #89: The Rise and Fall of Chuck Austen,” *Comics Alliance*, Townsquare Media, January 13, 2012.

¹¹⁷ One of Austen’s more controversial storyline, *The Draco* (*Uncanny X-Men* #429-431), was especially criticized by X-Men fans everywhere due to a dicey rewrite of a particularly beloved character of the franchise.

¹¹⁸ Marvel Comics, at the time of Austen’s hiring, had been brought back from the verge of bankruptcy. One of the strategies employed by Joe Quesada, Chief Director of Marvel Entertainment, to stop the company from going under was to hire on wildcard, independent freelancers like Austen. While Austen had done explicit, pornographic work before, he was mostly unknown in the industry – his employment with Marvel seemed like a “refreshing” choice at the time.

¹¹⁹ Angel appeared in the original team on *Uncanny X-Men* #1 (1963), Stan Lee and Jack Kirby.

book characters more or less stay around the age of 30 or so – Angel is an old character. He’s been around forever. Husk, on the other hand, is a young girl, who poses an uncomfortable age gap between Angel’s age and her own. In addition, the scene in which Angel swoops Husk off into the air, is perhaps meant to be whimsical or charming in some way, but it comes across as tacky, awkward, and frankly, a bit “weird.”

That said, while the scene is questionable, it calls into account how the role of Shakespeare mitigates some of the awkwardness and controversy. Utilizing Shakespearean “posturing” in both language and image has seemingly allowed for Austen to receive rare praise for his work on this comic book. This particular volume of Austen’s seems to be the least “hated” of his storylines, probably due to its affiliations with Shakespeare. One internet reviewer on Goodreads reluctantly mentions: “I actually wish I HADN’T sold this on eBay, because its [sic] a retelling of the Romeo and Juliet story, and I could use it with my students. Other than getting a surly teen’s interest, this is merely marginally more bearable than [Austen’s] other fare.”¹²⁰ Due to its proximity to Shakespeare, it seems as if reviewers are more or less unopposed to Austen’s work here. They feel as if it is “not as bad” as his other works and could potentially capture a “surly teen’s interest.” With this in mind, pairing it alongside Shakespeare could create an interesting juxtaposition – a subpar comic becomes a complicated space of interest and study beside the Bard. Because while it has been hailed as problematic in comics communities for the aforementioned scene with Husk and Angel, that’s also why I think it could be provocative as a place for discussion. If students read Austen’s work alongside the original script, there can be a “process” of deconstruction within these two texts, enabling students to push up against barriers, and in time, interrogate them: How do we get here? Why can Shakespeare be utilized in this

¹²⁰ Chris Vandyke, “Review on *She Lies With Angels*,” Goodreads Inc., April 5, 2007.

way? What, within Shakespeare, creates this “middle space” space for writers like Austen to place their problematic scenes?

In the end, the comic book is flawed and presents problems that should be discussed at length, but it is interesting that Austen chooses to position this scene amidst a Shakespeare adaptation. More likely, it is merely a callous choice, or inability, on Austen’s part to know his audience,¹²¹ but it also adds to the “middling” nature of this comic book. In taking both from Shakespeare and from the world of the comic book, Austen creates a space where he seemingly deems this type of behavior as “allowable.” But he also creates a space where the underlying tension of *Romeo and Juliet* is visualized by the mutations of the ousted mutants – such as Jeb and Josh Guthrie, while the division between the Capulets and the Montagues can be more radically seen in the militarization of Cabot’s mutant-killing armor. To add, having five comics present in the arc also allows for the reader to trace the “acts” of the play alongside the five comics. The storyline is both married to the original text of Shakespeare, as well as determined to free itself from the dominant understanding of Shakespeare’s text.

It is also worth noting, however, that comic books are not simply drawn and fused together. Austen first developed his script, Larroca and the colorist corroborated with Austen on the images and colors they wanted, and the finished project was put together by the general editor. Comic books utilize a script, just as dramatic texts do. When they are first written, there is no “set” image that is in the mind of the writer. The finished product is a collaboration between the artist and the writer. I mention this because it is important to note that the language of the comic does not determine the image, just as Shakespeare’s “language” does not determine the visual interpretation. Shakespeare can still exist in full fleshed out images, but it is up to the

¹²¹ The rating is for ages 12+.

student to determine “how” and “why” he exists within these images that Austen and Larroca provide.

PRINCE OF CATS: THE “EVOLVED” SHAKESPEARE

Up to this point, I’ve argued how *Deadpool Does Shakespeare* can act as a “new” introduction to Shakespeare, while *She Lies With Angels* has the potential to establish a complicated “middle ground” with Shakespeare’s original *Romeo and Juliet*. And though both of these adaptations have been especially useful in providing methodology and discussion for how to approach Shakespeare in the high school classroom, I believe the crowning graphic novel of my thesis and the most important piece to discuss is Ronald Wimberly’s *Prince of Cats*. To add from what I can tell, I am one of the first to discuss Wimberly’s adaptation in terms of its critical, cultural, and “Shakespearean” value.¹²² Moreover, Wimberly’s work is not to simply “mix” Shakespeare with a quirky “pop” adaptation as Doescher’s *Deadpool Does Shakespeare* or to find a “middle ground” between Shakespeare and the graphic novel adaptation as in *She Lies With Angels*; rather Wimberly’s text forces Shakespeare and his language to evolve. Whereas *Deadpool Does Shakespeare* conveys the capability of Shakespeare’s language to move and shift, and *She Lies With Angels* demonstrates that Shakespeare’s natural poeticism exists within our modern language, *Prince of Cats* tears apart Shakespeare’s language to not only embrace the original iambic pentameter but also the complicated, sociocultural subculture of 1980s Black

¹²² Although there have been reviews and accolades cast upon Wimberly’s work, and it is even being made into a feature film by Spike Lee in the coming year, there is very little discussion of Wimberly’s work within Shakespearean adaptation and appropriation studies.

Brooklyn. Wimberly's work expands upon what we know of Shakespeare's language and makes it into something completely new, separate, and yet, deeply rooted in two traditions: The Black Hip Hop, "remix" culture of the 1980s as well as Shakespeare's far reaching early modern dramatic one.¹²³

¹²³ The cover below is attributed completely to Wimberly, *Prince of Cats*, (Portland: Image Comics, 2012).



Figure 8: Ronald Wimberly, "Prince of Cats"

Wimberly's text, with roots of a loose autobiographical account mixed in, is yet another "remix" of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. However, to simply call this text an "iteration" of *Romeo and Juliet* does not give the text the credit it deserves. Not only does Wimberly write the narrative to pair alongside the five acts of the play, he extends many of the acts, focalizes them on a particular character, and adds a "sixth" act to the additional five that carry over from the original play. In addition to playing with the sequencing of the acts, Wimberly also manipulates the linear timeline of the story, bouncing back and forth between past and present. Romeo and Juliet are a minor storyline within this retelling; the text focuses more on Tybalt's incessant need for revenge and bitterness towards his rivalry with Romeo and the other Montagues. This storyline entails a good amount of switching from the present to the past, developing these relationships, and the characters that will define the present storyline. Although Shakespeare never identifies why the Montagues and the Capulets are in conflict within the original play text, we know it is due to some kind of civil discourtesy to one another. Wimberly, on the other hand, uses a nonlinear timeline to develop this schism between the two families and twist it into something more systemic. He artfully "seeds" the strife and violence between past and present, which builds to the apex of what will cause the ultimate demise of Tybalt. He hints at this strife in the opening "prologue" of the graphic novel:

Remember back in the day,
niggas wore waves,
Gazell-e shades, corn braids, dueled aplenty,
But never ended deadly, they wore dull blades
And kept it friendly, even though enemy.
Fast forward from nineteen hundred eighty-three
To whet steel corners, with new mutiny.
In Brooklyn Babel, where we lay our scene,
Here hood born youth, adolescence addled,
Spill civil blood, make civil hands unclean;
Traded rattled for father's swords and battled.
Saddled with their parents spiteful legacy

Love, it's collateral casualty.
A thin line is blurred, a child interred
To redeem American dreams deferred...¹²⁴

While Shakespeare's version of *Romeo and Juliet* may have centered around the lasting legacy of two family's uncivil factions, Wimberly's poetic "code switching" implies something different about the story we are about to hear. The usage of the original Shakespearean language – "spill civil blood, make civil hands unclean" – alongside Wimberly's use of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), makes the combination of these two languages into something rhythmically poetic, brassily prophetic, and spiritual. While Shakespeare wrote the original prologue in iambic pentameter – therefore designating it to a poetic meter – Wimberly's own prologue, a mixture of Renaissance terms and AAVE, carries a palpable beat within this amalgamation of languages, a real rhythm in its movement. As the prologue tells us, this story shifts away from an older, peaceful tradition of "keep[ing] it friendly" between "enemies," and instead, means to tell us a much sadder tale of the transformation from this spiteful parental legacy into a story of "collateral casualty." Wimberly uses two types of languages, not simply Shakespeare's, but AAVE, to seed this new tale of civil strife. In doing so, Wimberly's graphic novel broadens the expectation of Shakespeare's Elizabethan language. It does not have to be seen as frightening, strict, or inherently "Shakespearean," but can hold a multitude of other languages. Though it is still in the vein of Shakespeare, as the usage of the early modern language implies, the added use of AAVE tells us something very different about *Prince of Cats*' "retelling" of *Romeo and Juliet*. There is a new voice speaking, this time, and a new perspective by which to analyze this age-old story.

¹²⁴ Ronald Wimberly, *Prince of Cats*, (Portland: Image Comics, 2012), 5.

It is also worth noting that it is not only storyline that Wimberly changes, but the very visualization and illustrations of the graphic novel that make it into something completely evolved in the early modern tradition of Shakespeare's cultural legacy. Unlike the other graphic novels I have analyzed, Wimberly is both the illustrator and writer of the book. He uses an eclectic mix of 1980s color schemes that can only be described as "synthwave" – bright to dark purples, unnaturally bright magenta, sky blue and army green, with all of it cast up against dark backgrounds to make this unnatural array of colors seem shaky, tense, but altogether apt in their place within this world. His characters' shapes and bodies are simultaneously tall and lengthy, disproportionate, and beautiful – they are meant to come across as "cartoonistic" figures that don't seem entirely real. His depiction of Black skin is also particularly striking in that Wimberly is careful to depict an array of melanin variations – for instance, Petruchio is "light-skinned," whereas Tybalt is particularly "black." His willingness to make his cast of characters diverse in tone and feature is not simply a method by which to make Black seem like a monolithic construction of being "black"-skinned, but rather a nod to the understanding that Black is also a culture, a space, and a movement. That is at the core of Wimberly's text: the experience of being "Black." It is not a monolithic experience that Black stereotypes often convey, but rather, a colorful, bright, musical, moving experience that Wimberly mixes and visualizes across the pages of his graphic novel. He shows through "remixing" of the familiar and the new that there are elements of Black culture that are downright "Shakespearean" in nature and in form.

This text, because of its absolute independent mastery over its own account of language, characterization, and storyline, may not need to be coupled alongside Shakespeare within the classroom. My suggestion is that students merely indulge in Wimberly's graphic text and account for what it is: a crafted piece of English literature that solidifies the evolution of

Shakespeare within our contemporary moment. Unlike *She Lies With Angels*, which utilizes Shakespeare as a self-referential text, or *Deadpool Does Shakespeare*, which introduces the core elements of Shakespeare's tragedies, *Prince of Cats* blends Shakespeare into its own world. The 1980s Brooklyn that Wimberly creates is a living, breathing metropolis of an already established culture and space. These characters have histories, lives, narratives, and backstory – they are wholly rooted in this world. Whereas Shakespeare was used for both Austen and Doescher's texts as a method to both legitimize and transcend their adaptations to a more literary realm, Wimberly forces Shakespeare to take in this world he has created. Now, to be clear, Wimberly does not scold Shakespeare for being a relic of his age, but rather shows his audience what the Bard is *capable* of. Shakespeare can hold two languages, he can encompass Black spaces, and he can harness the wrenching tragedy of young Black men's senseless death because of reckless violence. Shakespeare is not only more accountable in Wimberly's graphic novel, but he is intertwined in its very core.

With this in mind, the foreword of Wimberly's graphic novel, written by John Jennings, calls the work a "SeeJay."¹²⁵ A word – that Jennings "made up (because that's what we do in the Academy)" – which ultimately means "a [visual 'sample' of] information that translates what he or she takes in from their visual built environment into narratives, graphic art, etc." Because of Jennings' expertise in culture and media, I think it is worth quoting him at length here:

Wimberly's narrative isn't just a mish-mash of thing[s] he digs. Yes it's *Romeo and Juliet* meets Kurosawa meets *The Warriors* meets "Planet Rock." However, what makes PRINCE OF CATS so innovative is the fact that it acts as a reified index of what Hip Hop culture would manifest itself as visually. That is, it's a pure cultural expression, straight from the source. The genius of Hip Hop culture is the method of production called the remix. The deliberate juxtaposition of seemingly unlike artifacts, assets, beats, what have you, into a cohesive re-mediated cultural expression. The brilliance of Hip Hop, and this story, isn't the formal aspects of it. Those are amazing, to be sure. What makes Wimberly a master of this medium is his visual and intellectual acumen to project

¹²⁵ John Jennings, "Foreword," 3.

equivalence onto myriad types of productions from various cultural sources. To a SeeJay, or whatever you want to call it, one thing is equal to the other. Therefore, one thing can stand in for the other. This syncretic attitude is the backbone of Hip Hop and its fueled generations of cultural expressions throughout the African Diaspora.¹²⁶

Just as Jennings informs us, the brilliance of *Prince of Cats* is its ability to not only act as a “reified index” to the visual manifestation of Hip Hop culture, but also its ability to portray the complex juxtapositions of Hip Hop visually. Wimberly takes Shakespeare, race and identity, and 1980s Hip Hop culture and combines them into a “remix” of something that possesses complex subculture and genre, as well as an artful completion of a hodgepodge of mixed-and-matched detail. In utilizing this “remixed” art, it allows for Wimberly to elevate Shakespeare to a different kind of space, culture, and energy. Wimberly employs Shakespeare as a vehicle to focus on African-American communities in the spaces of 1980s Brooklyn, which in this era, was particularly rife with strict policing laws, abject housing, and violence against people of color. This allows for Wimberly to lend a particular focus on race, diminishing Blackness in Brooklyn, and violence against young Black men within 1980s New York (as well as now). Plus, Wimberly also uses the language of 1980s Hip Hop to show how well the language of Shakespeare can be connected, intertwined, and “remixed” into an evolved amalgamation. Wimberly takes Shakespeare to another level by ensuring that each of the moving parts of his story – whether it be race, characterization, lyrical poetry, or visual culture – all have a place and ambient positioning within the context of the story. It is no longer a story simply about Romeo and Juliet, but a multitude of other cultural factors.

One reason for this shifting of focus is perhaps due to the fact that Wimberly chooses to focus on the minor characters of the play. Tybalt, the “Prince of Cats,” is the main character of the graphic novel, but the story also features important roles for Sampson, Gregory, Rosalyn, and

¹²⁶ John Jennings, “Foreword,” 3.

Petruchio. And while Romeo, a white teenager compared to the mostly Black *dramatis personae*, is still a significant character, his storyline is not a governing presence within the story. He hovers in the background, and though Tybalt and the rest of the Capulets seem to hold a special grudge against Romeo, his lingering presence does not strike the audience as particularly important. Furthermore, Romeo does not even meet Juliet until the very end of the story, and even then, Juliet and Romeo's meeting is not due to a large amount of particular fascination with one another; as throughout the story the two of them both have other romantic interests. Romeo, for the most part, is interested, like the original storyline implies, in Rosalyn, whereas Juliet, a young Black teenage girl just coming into her sexuality, finds herself attracted to her older, distant cousin, Tybalt. This is largely different from Shakespeare's original rendering of the love story between the two "star-crossed lovers," but it's also more meaningful. Romeo and Juliet's epic love story is a footnote at the end of the graphic novel – not the driving force for the devastation that happens at the end of it.

As audience members, we don't have as much of a concrete story for these minor characters like Tybalt, Sampson, and Gregory. We only know what the original play tells us – Sampson and Gregory are "cousins" of the Capulets, Tybalt is a cousin of Juliet, and Rosalyn is an uninterested ex-lover of Romeo. But I believe that is why Wimberly chooses to focus on these minor characters, as most readers are probably familiar with the story surrounding the title-piece characters of the play, Romeo and Juliet. Even if one has not read the play, there is probably some understanding of the "concept" of *Romeo and Juliet* – two young lovers wind up dead due to the tragic conflict between their two families. However, not everyone is perhaps as familiar with the "marginalized" characters that Wimberly chooses to make the focal point of his story. Because of their socially marginalized position as secondary characters within the play, who

happen to be unexplored and undeveloped, it allows for discussions of race, class, and identity to occur more naturally within Wimberly's work. Wimberly means to breathe life into these new, "marginalized" characters by "recasting" them as middle-class Black teenagers, growing up in 1983 Brooklyn.

With this message of "marginalization" as its centerpiece, Wimberly has the chance to craft new relationships and create counternarratives to the play. Tybalt, monikered as the "Prince of Cats," is sculptured into a vastly complex character through Wimberly's prose and illustrations. In this particular narrative, Tybalt, although being from the heavily populated Black and Latinx New York City borough of 1980s Brooklyn, goes to a preppy, private "white" school, speaks "white" as his friends note, and wears a formal school uniform throughout the story. It is actually in the opening scene of the graphic novel that we see Tybalt return from his prep school, wearing his school uniform, as he approaches his friends, Sampson and Gregory. The two are engaged in a game of dice when they greet Tybalt and proceed to tease him for his uniform's implied formality:

Gregory: Good coz, welcome back to weed and women.

Sampson: We had twice our share while you were away.

Tybalt [holding up an empty bottle of alcohol]: Verily, and twice nothing's nothing.

Sampson: Returned to us school'd yet unreformed.

Gregory: And where's Petruchio's witty riposte?

Gregory [in a new panel, goes on]: O woeful death that bitters revelry celebration
chases a friend's life lost. And turns spirits to brackish elegy.

Sampson: Verily, were Petruchio here, he'd serve Tybalt well! Look at his school dress.
A penguin's uniform, somehow he switched his clothes with his butler's.¹²⁷

A number of significant things happen in this short exchange between the boys, but the main idea is the implication that Tybalt's uniform is a sign of cultural "invasion" of Tybalt's Blackness. Sampson points out to Tybalt that his uniform appears to look like a "penguin" and

¹²⁷ Wimberly, 12.

that he seemingly “switched his clothes with his butler’s.” These are all indicators, while framed in a teasing manner, that offer the reader an insight to Tybalt’s positioning within his friend group. He is still “one” of them, but at the same time, there is a sure sign of difference between him and Sampson and Gregory. As Sampson’s remarks imply, Tybalt’s uniform is a type of disguise – he’s dressed as a penguin or has seemingly “switched with his butler” into more formal attire. Although Sampson and Gregory are merely teasing on some level, there is the indication that Tybalt is hiding behind this uniform, his Blackness disappearing into uniformity, and the repressed nature of his identity separates him from the other two boys. This subtle “dig” at Tybalt’s appearance and his “school’d yet unreformed” nature is indeed an indirect, but significant nod to the separation that lies between Tybalt and his friends. However, there is another factor in this exchange between the three boys that hangs over them – the “woeful death” of their friend, Petruchio, who was killed by Romeo. Petruchio’s absence lingers in this scene. When he is mentioned by Gregory, the boys’ expressions fall, and the panel turns “silent.”



Figure 9: Ronald Wimberly, “Silence for a friend.”

This single panel, pictured above, displays the mastery of Wimberly’s own illustrative prowess as it productively utilizes space within the illustration to show the emotional presence and tension of Petruchio’s death.¹²⁸ Wimberly uses a lack of space in the other panels to focus in on the boys’ faces, characterize their expressions, or use the extra space for more dialogue, but here he leaves this panel particularly sparse. The framing of the panel distances itself from Tybalt and Sampson, and while Gregory is closer to the viewer, his downcast gaze makes us feel displaced within this graphic rendering. This layout casts a great sense of loss within this scene – there is open space that is simply not occupied by something that *should* be there. What’s more is that most of the panels on the page display enough dialogue boxes to fill the space – whether this

¹²⁸ Wimberly, “Silence for a friend,” (Portland: Image Comics, 2012), 12.

means using a close-up panel on a character's face or a large enough one to occupy more than one dialogue box – but here, it seems there is a fundamentally “missing” textbox. In other words, based on Wimberly's format and layout of the page, it seems as if Tybalt or Sampson should be responding to Gregory's anguished question about the absence of Petruchio, but there is not a response, or a “witty riposte,” as Gregory begs for. It's as if the response that is meant from Petruchio simply “lingers” in the absence of the textbox, which casts a profound sense of loss over the entire scene. As readers will come to find throughout the graphic novel, this tone of profound loss, left by Petruchio, is heavy as it is significant. His death hovers in the background of the story as if it is a character in and of itself, making his absence deeply felt.

Petruchio, who we come to meet in a later “act” of the graphic novel, is obviously a close friend to Tybalt and the other boys, Sampson and Gregory. More than this, however, Petruchio and Tybalt are intimately intertwined within their characterizations and identities. In a later scene, towards the end of the graphic novel, Petruchio, as he doodles a graffiti tag in his sketchbook, tells us that “I've heard no word from Tybalt since fall. I think the boarding school's a good look for him if I'd the opportunity...or maybe art school.”¹²⁹ In this image, as seen below, Wimberly once more demonstrates not only a literary craft, but a visual intuition for melancholy imagery. Petruchio's mother, cooking breakfast, asks after Tybalt, while Petruchio, apparently drawing out a new design, looks pensively out the window of their apartment. The sound of the eggs and bacon cooking, which Wimberly illustrates by a panel “filled” with sound, creates an ambiance of the kitchen between the mother and her son. But Petruchio, despite his creative talent demonstrated in this simplistic scene, looks out the window longingly as light filters into the kitchen through the white outlined silhouette of the window. Though this scene strikes us as

¹²⁹ Wimberly, 109. Illustration in below figure is Wimberly, “Reflective Petruchio,” (Portland: Image Comics, 2012), 109.

comfortable and quiet, the viewer has the sense that Petruchio longs for more. Petruchio, as the story goes on to show us, is multitalented – his artistic capability to “tag” a wall or use spray paint to create a mural on the side of a building is without parallel. Like Tybalt, Petruchio has ambition and talent, but not the “opportunity” as his friend does. Petruchio is, arguably, a foil for Tybalt – he shares his ultimately tragic death at the end of the story, as well as his talent and capability for greatness. Between the two of them, it becomes a story of two young Black men who are both talented and smart, but only one has the “opportunity” to be formerly educated. And while that would seemingly make a difference in Tybalt’s own life, they both die in a bid of senseless violence.



Figure 10: Ronald Wimberly, “Reflective Petruchio.”

More to this end on Tybalt's complex characterization and development, is his relationship with his cousin, Juliet. Juliet in this story, as has been mentioned earlier, is a young Black teenage girl who is finally becoming aware of her own sexuality. In fact, the first scene we are given of Juliet is when she is in the bathroom of her high school with her friends, Roxie and Jacquelyn, discussing the nature of "sex." After Roxie mentions enduring sex only because he "is a gentleman and he endureth my fancies," Jacquelyn, the older girl of the group, informs them it is possible to like sex for the sake of "sex":

Jacquelyn: Verily, like Medusa, a freak as named by those who would suppress desire until its very fire extinguished—whose locked hair caught the light of serpent's scales and did halo her flawless countenance—whose very gaze doth calcify mankind and spying her rigid handiwork—doth furnish her carnal appetites. Made hungry by her labor's ripened fruit, the petrified she doth head first consume. But hunger denied by stone's resistance she doth delight herself in consumption's repeated attempt until the stone yields—it's congealing, molten core releasing.

[...]

Juliet: Shit, I appreciate thy descriptions, Jacquelyn. It's the closest I'll get to thy teenage abandon.

Roxie: Wherefore art thou waiting, Juliet? For golden band and wedding cake?

Juliet: Jacquelyn, please dost thou know my father? The Booming Voice of Lord Capulet quickens Medusa's stoniest victim.¹³⁰

This scene, while a mixture of both explicit content and shocking poeticism, is perhaps one of Wimberly's best within the story. Jacquelyn, describing herself as a contemporary "Medusa" – "whose very gaze doth calcify mankind" – not only summons a fairly powerful image of a teenage Black girl from Brooklyn tying herself into an era of Classicism and myth, but she further describes this so-called "calcification of mankind" as her apparent "handiwork." Handiwork that precedes to "furnish her carnal appetites." Obviously, Jacquelyn's skilled "handiwork" is an elegant stand-in for the colloquial term known as a "hand-job," which seems to go in Jacquelyn's favor as one would expect. But more than that, Jacquelyn takes this crass

¹³⁰ Wimberly, 33-34.

understanding of sexual innuendo and explicit content and transforms it into a poetic edifice. In her description of sex, she analogizes herself to Medusa, “whose hair caught the light of serpent’s scales,” thus creating her into a fictitious creature of Grecian myth, which also aligns her with Shakespearean conventions of metaphor, analogy, and heightened imagery. With this in mind, in using Shakespearean analogy to highlight the sexual awakening of a young Black woman, Wimberly apotheosizes young Black women’s sexuality as not only a step in a sacred, ancient tradition (like that of Greek myth), but a poetic act. Moreover, it is not often that we are given the experiences of young Black women discussing the preconceived nature of their sexual desires. Black women historically across many mediums are often oversexualized, exoticized within their sexual desire, or not given a sexuality at all. Upending this longstanding ideology, Wimberly creates a powerful dynamic in making Jacquelyn – who is rather sexually “experienced” – versus Juliet, who describes Jacquelyn’s speech as the “closest [she’ll] get to [her] teenage abandon.” It’s also worth noting that the girls are discussing Jacquelyn’s exploits in the girls’ bathroom of their high school as they pass a joint between the three of them in between class. This discussion of Black female sexuality amongst the three young girls, the private spherical nature of the space, and the cultural habits that Wimberly creates here, gives the audience the sense that they are witnessing not simply Shakespeare, but Black culture and poeticism.

Because characters like Jacquelyn, as I explored above, Petruchio, and Tybalt are “marginalized” characters in the context of the original play (if they are even part of it – Jacquelyn is a creation of Wimberly’s own making), the inattention to their dynamics and unexplored history, allows for Wimberly to not only “create” a history and context for these characters, but also to explore understandings and cultural spaces of Blackness. In the context of

a secondary level classroom this may sound particularly daunting, but even if the niche cultural quintessence is lost on young students, this graphic novel still works as a method by which to explore race, class, and socioeconomic strife. In using the skeleton of Shakespeare's original plot of *Romeo and Juliet*, Wimberly "resets" our understanding of tragedy on the terms of the original text. Romeo and Juliet's death, in most of its original iterations,¹³¹ has always been a story of two white children of upper-class families, dying over miscommunication. Wimberly flips this understanding of the tragedy and instead, centers it around the death of young Black men in an era of not only rising violence against young Black people, but an era in which that violence was seen as necessary, legal, and federally "justified." This systematic reworking of the play allows for Wimberly to question the nature of Shakespearean tragedy with young Black teenagers, putting the central focus of his retelling on the tragic ways in which Black youth are often killed due to senseless violence. Wimberly begs the question as to how this tragedy can be looked at differently under the guise of violence against young Black men.

As previously mentioned, Wimberly sets his tale amidst the background of 1983 Brooklyn, which amidst the hardline policies and policing of New York City Mayor Ed Koch, was also propped up against the beginning years of Ronald Reagan's presidency. Although neither Koch nor Reagan are mentioned explicitly within the graphic novel, the tone and setting of Wimberly's text cannot help but call these men's controversial policies into question. Prince Escalus, renamed Mayor Escalus in Wimberly's text, is "quoted" within the graphic novel in a news article on the rising number of lethal "duels" within Brooklyn: "Rebellious subjects, enemies to peace, / Profaners of this neighbour-stained steel, -- / Throw your midtemper'd

¹³¹ Shakespeare most likely used Arthur Brooke's 1562 poem, *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*, as well as William Painter's 1580, *The Palace of Pleasure*, as sources for his lovestruck tragedy. Although there are distinct differences between the three works, they all end with the lovers complicated miscommunication and tragic deaths.

weapons to the ground, / And hear the sentence of your moved mayor. / If ever you disturb our streets again, / Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace.”¹³² It is important to note that Mayor Escalus is a Black man within this text, but this threat rings familiar in the backdrop of early 1980s New York City under the mayoral direction of Ed Koch. Koch had passed legislation that gave police stricter authority in dealing with criminal offenders as well as the large homeless population of the city. Escalus here threatens with a similar intent: If “profaners” and “rebellious subjects” disturb the city’s “peace,” there will be harsh consequences.

Similarly, Reagan, in September of 1982, had proposed the infamous Criminal Justice Reform Act, which – as part of a three-pronged piece of legislation – “would limit the insanity defense, revise the rule excluding illegally obtained evidence from criminal trials and restrict defendants’ ability to obtain Federal court review of convictions returned in state courts.”¹³³ Amongst the bill’s harsher policies, it would allow for police to search and obtain evidence of criminal activity without a warrant. This bill would inarguably affect minority populations, specifically Black men, for ages to come. To add, these policies that Reagan and Koch upheld would contribute and build on longstanding racist and systemic disadvantages of the African-American community to perpetuate and strengthen the idea of the Black “criminal myth” in American society. In highlighting these subtle nods to 1980s policy and judgments through figures like Mayor Escalus, Wimberly challenges his audience to see this defamation to Black people as a Shakespearean tragedy. Just as Shakespeare had the power to amplify Austen’s controversial writing in *She Lies With Angels*, so too does Wimberly utilize Shakespeare to emphasize the heaviness, tragedy, and violence perpetrated against Black bodies within this

¹³² Wimberly, 106.

¹³³ Leslie Maitland, “REAGAN OFFERS BILL TO TIGHTEN RULES ON CRIMINAL DEFENDANTS,” *New York Times*, The New York Times Company, September 14, 1982.

world. In doing so, Wimberly deconstructs these policies surrounding the “criminal myth” of Black people and strips them down to a bare-basic understanding: this is a tragedy on a Shakespearean scale.

With that in mind, not only does this text act as a space of which to see the politics of race of 1980s America, but we also see the psychological effect and tragic loss of young Black men in the African-American community. Tybalt, long before he dies at the end of the text, seems to see himself as a man already marked for death. His bitterness and drive for revenge of Petruchio’s death leaves space for not much else besides his rage. Demanding to know if Juliet has “wedded” Romeo, Tybalt confronts Friar Lawrence in the very church where Petruchio’s funeral was held. Friar Lawrence, seated in a pew beside Tybalt, gives him an honest, but heartbreaking answer: “This very morning they exchanged vows and never have I seen such joy on her face.”¹³⁴ Once again, Wimberly’s ability to portray the quiet, emotional depth of a scene, pulses throughout his illustrations with raw tangibility. Tybalt’s expression is slumped, crestfallen, and defeated. The viewer can almost hear the silent, echoey nature of the church, the aching, but reflective atmosphere as Tybalt nears the end of his story. To Tybalt, it seems as if his long voyage of revenge is over. Romeo killed Petruchio, now he has taken Juliet as his wife. After a long moment of silence, Tybalt asks the friar: “Can bloodstained shoes walk in heaven?”¹³⁵ The friar seems to listen to Tybalt in the first panel – his eyes are projected forward, while Tybalt looks distantly beyond the panel’s dark edges. While the page before showed Tybalt’s wrathful pursuit to find Romeo before he married Juliet, he now seems oddly reserved, accepting of what is to come.

¹³⁴ Wimberly, 135.

¹³⁵ Wimberly, 135.



Figure 11: Ronald Wimberly, “A heavy question.”

And yet, Tybalt’s question *weighs* on this scene.¹³⁶ Lawrence’s eyes have shifted down, emotion is tethered to his features, Tybalt’s own gaze has sunk to the ground. In a church, where months before Petruchio was mourned by Tybalt and his family, the “Prince of Cats” dares to poke at a far more tragic mystery. This question that Tybalt asks, carries no small amount of meaning. Before he died, Petruchio purchased bright red shoes that he had long saved up for, but when he is killed, his mother gives them to Tybalt since Petruchio would have wanted them to go to his closest friend. Wearing these shoes as an insignia of his revenge, Tybalt wears Petruchio’s “bloodstained” shoes as he embarks on a mission to become the “top dueler” of the city.

¹³⁶ Wimberly, “A heavy question,” (Portland: Image Comics, 2012), 135.

Eventually becoming skilled enough to face Romeo, Tybalt means to wear Petruchio's shoes as he kills his greatest enemy. However, after his conversation with Friar Lawrence, the shoes' meaning has seemingly changed. While the shoes bear no actual blood on them, they are metaphorically "bloodstained" both with the blood of Tybalt's victims as well as Petruchio's own. But more than that, they have come to represent the very fragile sanctity of Tybalt, and the adolescence that he and Petruchio have both been robbed of simply for being Black children caught in the strife and violence of their youth. As the prologue reminds us, this is the "spiteful" legacy they were merely born into: "Here hood born youth, adolescence addled, / Spill civil blood, make civil hands unclean; / Traded rattled for father's swords and battled. / Saddled with their parents spiteful legacy."¹³⁷ Wimberly's brilliance in "remixing" the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, allows him to not only show the striking death of Black children as Shakespearean tragedy, but to demonstrate that Black youth, born into a society that ignores the racism, oppression, and violence done to them, might as well be marked for death just as two "star-crossed lovers of Verona." When Tybalt asks if "bloodstained shoes can walk in heaven?" he is really asking after the state of his own soul – are Black children, caught in the crossfires of the violence they are born into, worth saving? Do their lives matter? Do they also get to "walk in the streets of heaven"? On the next page, Tybalt is killed by Romeo as he forces Romeo's own blade through his stomach. The cycle of violence between Romeo and Tybalt ends, but at the expense of yet another Black child's life.

Obviously, this is not the same text as *Romeo and Juliet*. There are some spots where dialogue is copied and the characters who are fated to die, end up dying. However, Wimberly has changed the focus of the plot – time is not linear, and he tells multiple stories through the text,

¹³⁷ Wimberly, 5.

not simply that of Romeo or Juliet. He reinvents these characters and gives us a richer story by which to follow. He is not only adapting Shakespeare, but he is giving his readers an entirely new piece of literature. Although students could benefit from reading Wimberly's text alongside *Romeo and Juliet*, it is also an independent text that is capable of producing the weight and emotional strain of the Shakespearean tragedy. The text, alone, speaks to Shakespeare's endurance as a cultural framework throughout time, nailing down the message that these graphic narratives can, and do, build upon Shakespeare while still paying homage to his work. In arguably the most epic romance of all-time, Wimberly creates an entirely new story out of the marginalized characters of the play and gives them extreme relevance and importance. Students not only learn the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, but they can understand the value of these smaller characters within Wimberly's work. It teaches value in understanding race and the lines of the complicated socioeconomic-political lines that define this 1980s culture, as well as our own contemporary moment of racial tension and divide. There is also an emotional value in the silent scenes that Wimberly passes to us – a reverence for those lost, making the emotional depth of his characters mean that much more. Alongside a deeper cultural context in legacy, Wimberly also gets at a deeper question of our society and culture: Why should the civil violence that these Black children are born into define their sanctity? Ultimately, *Prince of Cats* seeks to create a new cultural artifact within Shakespeare's text, but perhaps more importantly, to make us rethink how the nature of tragedy is reshaped by the divides of our own society.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, Wimberly's text showcases what we have always understood of Shakespeare's writing: he demonstrates an uncanny, deeply moving portrait of the human heart and the emotion that moves us. At the same time, however, Wimberly also fundamentally "changes" Shakespeare in his work – the nature of tragedy is no longer centered on the lost love of two white teenagers in rich Venetian society, but rather the tragic, violent killings of young, Black men in 1980s Brooklyn. Of course, the same can be said for Doescher and Olivera's *Deadpool Does Shakespeare*, as well as Austen and Larroca's *She Lies With Angels* – all of these graphic novel adaptations bring something profoundly different to the story, plot, and characters of Shakespeare's plays. While *Prince of Cats* demonstrates the epic potential of Shakespeare within graphic novels, *Deadpool Does Shakespeare* portrays how the violent, but ever-wisecracking Deadpool can serve as an "edgy" introduction into Shakespeare's greatest tragedies. *She Lies With Angels*, a middle text of both Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Marvel's X-Men, provides insight into how Shakespeare is not simply a "source text," but also a point of comparison, reflexive thought, and full of new meaning when read simultaneously with the graphic novel. With these points in mind, these three texts demonstrate that Shakespeare graphic novels have a power in not simply being "picture books" to be read alongside Shakespeare's plays, but rather act as sites of complex, meaningful art and culture. Whether the story involves an immature, slightly inappropriate antihero in red spandex (like Deadpool), or the

inordinately beautiful, aching tragedy of Tybalt's 1980s backstory in Brooklyn – these graphic novels *physically* illustrate that Shakespeare can exist, mingle, and occupy even the most outlandish of graphic spaces.

When the Lambs' first published their *Tales of Shakespeare*, they probably did not realize when they positioned illustrated plates beside a "paraphrased" version of the play, they had changed the way we are meant to view "illustrated" Shakespeare forever. More likely than anything else, they were simply trying to ease the pressure on students and young readers in looking at Shakespeare. In doing so, they published images, capable of movement and life, and ultimately, changed the way Shakespeare's poetry and dramatic text can be read and viewed. Shakespeare's language is a powerful part of his plays, but so are the images he creates. Out of Deadpool's comedic, but explicit violence, do we not see that Shakespeare also originally composed a bloody, but darkly funny play in *Hamlet*? Does the angel imagery of Josh in *She Lies With Angels* "echo" something lofty and poetic as Shakespeare? Are the deaths of young Black men not as tragic as that of Romeo and Juliet's? These images obviously echo, reverberate, and speak of Shakespeare deeply, even if they never say a line of his play. While I want us to reconsider Shakespearean graphic novels, I also point us toward the images of these comics with a hope that critics – such as the unnamed one in my literature review – reconsider that Shakespeare is boundless, nebulous, and a source of creation in an epic, ongoing cultural saga. In that same vein, if nothing else, I hope my work has demonstrated that Shakespeare is not simply a text, a script, or a point of monotonous analysis for thousands of students every year, but also a real, tangible part of a graphic realm that brings new questions alight as to how his language, poetry, drama, emotions, meaning, characters, stories – all that makes Shakespeare "Shakespeare" – is not always what is "written" in the language, but also, what is very simply

“seen.” I encourage my fellow instructors, teachers, educators, critics, and skeptics to look to these “images” of Shakespeare – to study them as we study ancient poetry, to become immersed in the worlds that these artists and writers have created. These images are also worthy of study and analysis, and perhaps in doing so we can hope to become better teachers and students of Shakespeare.

For one final time, I turn to Douglas Lanier, who sees these graphic novels in relation to Shakespeare as a type of “rhizome” in the grand labyrinth of Shakespeare adaptations. And in closing, I would argue that Lanier’s theory is right to an extent: Shakespeare’s adaptations are an ever-growing rhizomatic maze of pieces and parts. But I also see a problem in Lanier’s judgment. If a “singular” rhizome symbolizes an adaptation “branching” off of other rhizomes, one is left with the image of Shakespearean adaptations being separate, untouching, and ultimately impermeable – forever connected by the limbs, but never truly entwined. In my understanding, I see these adaptations and the so-called “original texts” as overlapping voices, sounds, images, and languages over the course of the past 400 years. After all, we never “see” or “hear” just one image or text of Shakespeare. Just as Wimberly once contemplated why “those reckless children of Verona died so young,” so has Spike Lee decided, in his upcoming adaptation of *Prince of Cats*, that the graphic novel also contemplates far larger questions of race and tragedy worthy of film. In this instance, we see a three-generation arc of inspiration and adaptation taking place: Shakespeare to Wimberly to Spike Lee and back to Shakespeare again. To say that Shakespeare is simply a “language” is foolishly limiting of both his texts and the art that comes with them – Shakespeare is a language, yes, but he is also a moment, a culture, an epoch, a legacy, and a graphic novel.

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