

Negotiating Shakespearean Meaning: the Case of Manga

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1. Introduction: Shakespeare – between high and popular culture

There is no denying that Shakespeare has been, for hundreds of years now, an emblem of culture, his name and image have turned into a brand, while the Bard himself has come to be perceived as a quasi-untouchable entity.

This phenomenon has mostly to do with one of the two tendencies that circumvent the identity of culture in general; on the one hand, there is the propensity towards protectionism as far as the repository of myths and cultural memories are concerned. On the other hand, there is this desacralization that culture operates on its artefacts, with a view to rendering them more accessible to their ultimate beneficiaries. We are actually talking here about a simplified model accounting for the distinction between high and low culture. Shakespeare and his art have been perceived as the epitome of high culture, in an effort to set the example of sophistication, erudition, artistry and genius. However, fact is that long before becoming a benchmark of high culture, Shakespeare's work was largely popular. And that is what it all began with: Shakespeare's popularity.

Let us go a bit deeper into things. Since the term "popular" derives from the Latin *popularis* (of the people), it means that the phrase *popular culture* might encompass whatever forms of entertainment are mass-produced and considerably appealing to the general public. Hence, being linked to the general taste, which is constantly fluctuating, as well as to the size of its audience, any form of popular culture is short-lived and doomed to perish sooner or later.

By contrast, high culture is perceived as independent of variables such as audience size or taste. If we were to turn to Pierre Bourdieu's phrasing (1996), we might say that high culture can be defined by *pure gaze* which presupposes a professional, detached, aestheticist, etic and specialized manner of considering art objects, as opposed to the ordinary, *popular aesthetic* which relies on identification with and approval of cultural objects. This brings up another variable into discussion, that of relevance. In Fiske's view, popular culture is "made at the

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interface between the cultural resources provided by capitalism and everyday life. This identifies relevance as a central criterion” (1989: 61). Consequently, unless a work of art finds its echo in the people, it will become irrelevant. This echo can be multi-layered, and the more plentiful the potential for interpretation in a work of art, the better chance for it to survive.

Truth be told, we have all been indoctrinated for much too long with this clear-cut distinction between low and high, trash and canonical, popular and elitist. And we have been suffocated by the ideas that whatever reaches high numbers of people, whatever is designed for mass consumption is part of popular culture. However, as Gillespie and Rhodes aptly put it, this cannot be further from the truth: mass culture presupposes products made OF the people (like folk culture, for instance), and not FOR the people, so they should be in some way emanations of the people, an acceptance that corresponds to an initial use of the term:

Older forms of popular culture were for the most part not specifically commercial activities, and may be understood as the cultural expressions of the people themselves, encompassing holiday customs, seasonal rituals and other forms gathered under the label of ‘folk tradition’ (2006: 16).

The two researchers conclude that within this specific interpretation, Shakespeare’s writing was indeed popular, being created from the expressions OF people.

Therefore, the distinction between high and low culture might not be that definitive, and might be fuelled by the attempt to hold on to the classics’ pristine nature, while ignoring a natural tendency:

This drive to keep Shakespeare and popular culture apart is shared both by those who lament that popular culture has been displacing our cultural heritage, and by those who champion popular culture as the people’s alternative to an elitist literary canon (Lanier 2002: 3).

From the above-mentioned perspective, this study contends that when we speak about Shakespeare’s work, the original one or its plethora of modern-day adaptations, we should override the existing distinction between high and low culture, look at individual re-visitations, and observe how much of the Shakespearean feeling they carry across, and to what purpose. To the end of proving this, my research focuses on **manga Shakespeare** as a particular type of modern adaptation, unjustly undervalued nowadays. An attempt will be made at dismantling some of the potential objections against manga as literary genre; then, fragments from three different manga editions of the same play (*Hamlet*) will be considered, and both the pluses and minuses, as far as meaning transfer is concerned, will be explored.

A first step towards reaching the goal of this study will be made in the section that follows, which aims at briefly mapping the plurality of Shakespeare’s heritage in our modern world, the public perception of this plurality, and, as corollary, the necessity, the possibility, or lack thereof, of assigning some products from this heritage to either high or low/pop culture.

2. Carrying Shakespeare across or *translating* Shakespeare

We follow the previous reasoning and concede that even though there still is this notable divide between high and pop culture, at least as far as Shakespeare is concerned, it is exactly this divide that grants *double access* (Gripsrud 1989) to the Bard. Indeed, all of us may have first become familiar with Shakespeare through other means than the formal, educational one, like “advertisements, television comedies, the names of pubs and beers” (Holderness 2001: 93–94); but then, it is also true that Shakespeare’s name equates with a “universal symbol of high art, of culture, of education, of the English spirit” (ibidem).

During his lifetime, Shakespeare was essentially perceived as popular since his work was performed, along with those of other well-known Elizabethan playwrights’, on a public stage, and they enjoyed popular success. When exactly Shakespeare started turning into a “mortal god” (Bloom 1998: 3) is subject to speculation; however, there is consensus among theorists that one moment in particular served as elevation point: it is the publication of the First Folio, in 1623, a collection of some of his plays. Beyond the highly expensive calfskin binding, which turned the product itself into an almost unreachable artefact, the mere fact of it being a written product, raised its status and made it accessible to much fewer people than it had been in oral form. In Lanier’s view, this leap from stage performance to written product

removed Shakespeare from a social space where immediate, irrational, bodily pleasures, political and social fractiousness held sway. [...now he] could be engaged rationally and dispassionately experienced within a domestic space. [...it] allowed Shakespeare to be separated from association with the unruly elements of popular culture (Lanier 2002: 30).

The next obvious step was that of canonizing Shakespeare’s work by making it part of the educational curricula all over the world. While this process has been happening for several centuries now, and it has become somewhat of a tradition, the mentality and taste of the public have changed too, if only under the pressure of social, political and technological advancements. Therefore, while Shakespeare kept being ubiquitous in the Western culture to say the least, the gap between having him there within easy reach and actually accessing the meaning of Shakespeare’s work grew bigger and bigger by the day.

Hence, the need to make Shakespeare accessible, particularly to the younger generation, brought about all sorts of Shakespearean adaptations, interpretations, and translations, for that matter. Even though to some researchers this effort is just “a utopian desire that Shakespeare might be made genuinely popular if only his work could be made consonant with particular tastes and practices” (Lanier 2002: 46), reality shows us that Shakespeare has been gaining in popularity among the youth precisely due to these adaptations. Sometimes even without being aware of it, we all are nowadays heeding Claudius’ urge “You must translate. ‘Tis fit we understand them” (Hamlet, IV, 1). So, translated we have!

From the many angles through which Shakespeare may be decoded – psycho-analytical, feminist, political, religious, queer-theory, etc – to graphic novels,

manga, movies, novel interpretations, the range is so vast, and it can all be subsumed under the heading of translation, as a homage or effort to never cease comprehending the Bard. These *translations* bear themselves an impressive number of names according to where exactly the emphasis is laid in this interplay between original and translation; quite interestingly, Lanier walks us through this terminological field: ‘spin-off’ – a term that suggests there is a core Shakespeare whose norm is viewed from a different angle; ‘imitation’ and ‘revision’ – both of which admitting of a sacrosanct Shakespeare belonging to high culture, but capable to transgress the borders to popular culture; ‘variation’ – the focus here being on a staple Shakespeare from which a deviation might be allowed; ‘adaptation’ and ‘transposition’ – terms which suggest minor changes to the original; ‘reinvention’ or ‘invention’ – terms which set Shakespeare in perspective and assign his work a sort of atemporality feature; ‘appropriation’ – a term that generously allows for moving Shakespeare from one culture to another, and so on (2002).

I would add to Lanier’s list of terms that of ‘re-visitation’, in the sense that while Shakespeare is what Shakespeare is, we can always respectfully pay visits to his works, and, by opening a window, let the light in. Just as with any type of translation, the benefits of re-visiting Shakespeare are more numerous than the downsides of doing so; however, in this passage from the original to the modern re-visitation, many concerns have been expressed as to the loss of the poetry of Shakespeare viewed as the quintessence of the Bard’s work:

These types of rewriting involve a transaction between an ancient text and a modern agenda. The risk is that very often it is the contemporary issue that seems more important, as the plays are refocused towards modern issues. Through this sort of ‘translation’ of meaning, an important part of Shakespeare is lost, namely the immortal part. Shakespeare is first of all famous for his vocabulary and his peculiar way of combining words with powerful imagery in a constellation of marvellous metaphors. One may easily notice that the translated piece is a reduction of the very beauty of language that Shakespeare used in his works. Because of this reduction, the figure of the Bard loses its particular aspects and becomes a part of the ordinary.” (Moscaliuc 1994: 10)

If we view things from this angle then, all translations, of any kind, seem useless. Instead, let us concentrate on the creative power of any translation / re-visitation, on the fact that any such endeavour creates a cultural dialogue with the original work and ensures the best medium for cultural exchange. We believe, then, that manga Shakespeare is one of the *translation* forms that allows Shakespeare’s voice to be heard probably louder than many of the other forms of adaptation.

3. Manga Shakespeare – a form of transmedial adaptation

A *re-visitation* then could be perceived as a mode of writing *per se*, and, through this, as a form of translating not only the original words, but the entire cultural wrap of the original text. Manga is a form of transmedial re-visitation, which means that it takes a story or concept from one medium (in this case, Shakespeare’s plays) and adapts it to a different medium (the manga or graphic novel format). This process involves translating the original story into a new visual

language that can be understood by readers who may not even be familiar with the original medium or, if they are, they may find it hard to decode.

The transmedial re-visitation is a common practice in modern storytelling, as creators seek to explore new ways of telling familiar stories and reaching new audiences. Manga is a particularly effective medium for transmedial adaptation because of its highly visual nature and its ability to convey complex emotions and ideas through images and symbols.

Let us admit that in our increasingly visual culture, visual literacy has become increasingly important. The concept of visual literacy refers to the ability to understand and interpret visual information. Manga requires a significant level of visual literacy, as the combination of images and words creates a unique form of storytelling that is hardly found in other media. Furthermore, the use of images and words in manga requires the reader to be able to interpret the images and understand their relationship to the text. So, reading manga, in general, is quite an experience, let alone, reading manga Shakespeare. After all,

the reading of Shakespeare in manga form can be as sophisticated and critically demanding a process as the reading of Shakespeare in a scholarly edition—even if the popular reading because of the images may more immediately provoke the reader’s emotional engagement with the characters and actions (Grande 2010: 8).

We might even say that, though oftentimes underappreciated, reading Shakespeare in manga form is a more complex experience than witnessing a theatrical production of Shakespeare’s plays. The reader will be fully engaged in a multi-levelled experience, will actively participate in decoding the meaning, will need to supply the missing, non-verbalized information with other aesthetically relevant features such as colour, typeface, interplay of facial expressions and sizes. All in all, a manga version of Shakespeare’s text is a genuinely complex experience combining the elements of both textual adaptation and visual representation, as “what theatre does in time, comic books do in space: juxtapose text and image to tell a story” (Hulbert et al. 2009: 173).

The entire discussion on whether Shakespeare might read more efficiently in manga form or not actually roots in the age-old debate regarding the priority that words seem to have over pictures, or the other way round. As a matter of fact, the discourse surrounding the relationship between images and words has a notably extensive lineage, with its origins traceable to Simonides’ observation that “poetry is a speaking picture and painting a mute poem”, and Horace’s dictum, “ut pictura poesis” (“as is painting, so is poetry”). Subsequently, Leonardo da Vinci contributed to this discourse through his compilation of essays evaluating the merits of various art forms. Remarkably, da Vinci arrived at the conclusion that painting is the superior art form. This notion, among others, inspired subsequent thinkers such as Lessing, who countered da Vinci’s stance in his work *Laocoön* by asserting the superiority of poetry over the plastic arts.

In this very context, the manga medium seems to be perfectly suitable to the adaptation of Shakespeare since there is in his plays a sort of verbal-visual core that can be unpacked in a modern way in our modern times. Manga relies on a combination of both images and words to tell a story. The images provide a visual

representation of the story, while the words provide the narrative and dialogue. The use of images and words in manga generates a unique combination that allows for a level of storytelling that is not possible with just one medium alone. While images will convey emotion, action, and setting, words will provide insight into a character's thoughts and motivations. Still, while the manga medium incorporates both language and images as distinct narrative channels, each provides unique advantages and is subject to several limitations. Images possess the ability to engage the reader within the depicted space, visually depict characters and settings, suggest a temporal context, and convey emotions through facial expressions. However, images are unable to explicitly convey propositions, represent possibilities, conditionality, counterfactuality, the passage of time, internal thoughts, dialogue, or provide evaluations or judgments. On the other hand, language provides certain “affordances” in terms of representation (Ryan 2004: 19). Ryan then observes that language can effectively portray temporality, change, and causality, enabling the formulation of definite propositions by referring to specific objects and properties. Additionally, language can distinguish between actuality, virtuality, and counterfactuality. Nevertheless, language falls short in visually depicting the appearance of settings and characters, portraying aesthetics or beauty, and representing continuous processes.

Despite the obvious complexity of manga reading and the particular sort of literacy required, manga Shakespeare is still sometimes perceived as awkward, as maybe an unworthy relative of the original, and the reasons for this may vary from format-related to content-related issues. In what follows, we will briefly enumerate the main objections raised to considering manga a worthy form of Shakespearean adaptation, and we will try to dismantle them one by one.

4. Objections against manga Shakespeare

4.1. Manga Shakespeare is a dumbed-down version of the original

This objection basically refers to the fact that in order to adapt the text to the manga format, the text should be significantly reduced. The tendency is to generally remove words and preserve the plot line. Let us admit, though, that this is a common practice in adaptations of Shakespearean plays in various mediums, including film and stage productions. The cutting of text in adaptations is often necessary to condense the play into a shorter format that is more accessible to a wider audience. Shakespeare's plays can be quite long, with complex plotlines and many characters. The process of adapting a play into a graphic novel, for instance, requires a significant amount of editing and selection of which parts of the play are to be kept and which to be cut.

But since this is what happens also in theatrical productions, probably the underlying actual concern is that manga Shakespeare operates more of a substitution than a reduction. It appears to replace the text rather than adapt it. However, “the concern is rooted in a critical judgment; when theatre cuts (even for practical reasons) it is artistic interpretation; when comic books cut (even for practical reasons), it is because they are a juvenile form.” (Hulbert et al. 2009: 174).

Truth be told, even if it does operate a substitution, this may be to the advantage of the end user, so to say. The reduction is made up for through substitution. And the substituting material demands particular skills to decode, as we have seen above. Visual literacy should not be considered lightly. Particularly as this medium addresses a younger audience, with its sequential panels containing images combined with text, it might support and encourage the development of their critical skills: graphic novels require readers to be actively engaged in the process of decoding and comprehending a range of literary devices, including narrative structures, metaphor and symbolism, point of view, and the use of puns and alliteration, intertextuality and inference (Maynard 2012).

So, eventually, provided we view adaptations as creative reinterpretations of the original material, we might cease to perceive the cutting of Shakespeare's text as a sacrilege or a detraction. The ultimate goal of such an adaptation is to bring the story closer to the audience and medium, while still seizing the essence of the original work. Manga Shakespeare does exactly that: it brings Shakespeare's plays to a new audience through an accessible and visually engaging medium.

4.2. In manga, the focal point is the innovation of manga illustrators, not the original author

As we shall see further on in this study, manga volumes are the results of collaborative work between the original author, the illustrator, the editor and, possibly the textual adviser. Hence, at first sight, the importance of the primary author, in our case Shakespeare, seems to get diluted. The focus, instead, appears to be more on the talent and artistry of the illustrator. So, the main contention here would be that

even as *Manga Shakespeare* encourages a more immediate participation and emotional involvement with Shakespeare's characters and story, it encourages us to contemplate the manga art and hence shift our focus from content to form, particularly to the artistic technique of the manga artist, which defamiliarizes the conventions of "realistic" characterization (Grande 2010: 10).

The arguments that could be brought against such a view are multiple. Firstly, even though Shakespeare's originality lies, to a great extent, in his unique way with words, his characterization and the innovations that he brought in this respect, it may be that precisely this unique feature should become a hindrance to the young, modern reader who wishes to capture the essence of Shakespeare. What if manga illustrations free this essence from the formal conventions of characterization and make it more readily accessible to the audience?

Secondly, we have established that, in order to read manga Shakespeare, one needs to possess a particular sort of literacy; so, the co-presence of text and illustrations may be an incentive to engaging the younger audience into this unique experience. Manga Shakespeare then is able to boost the cultural confidence of the younger audience, to entrust them with the capability of critical thinking.

Thirdly, let us remember that the visual component, even if in a different shape, was always supposed to be part of the Shakespearean experience. Shakespeare wrote his plays primarily for stage and theatre performances heavily

rely on the actors' talent, on their gestures and facial expressions, on their voice, and so on. We might even say that the Shakespearean experience cannot be complete in the absence of the image, because this is how Shakespeare meant it to be. From this perspective, manga Shakespeare might provide the closest substitute to the impact that Shakespeare intended his plays to have. Plus one advantage: the fact that the reader can always go back in space, so to say, that is in the space of the volume, and re-experience or experience at a deeper level, what may have got lost in time.

4.3. Manga supplies a fixed interpretation

It is common knowledge that Shakespeare's plays allow for sundry meanings and as many decodings. Since manga Shakespeare is a re-visitation of the Shakespearean original, it is often blamed for providing just a univocal interpretation of the plurivocal nature of the original.

However, it is important to note that this interpretation is not necessarily fixed. While the visual elements of the manga may provide a particular interpretation of the story, the actual text of Shakespeare's plays may remain unchanged. Therefore, readers are free to interpret the story in their own way, using the manga illustrations as a visual aid to help them understand the story and characters.

Furthermore, the manga Shakespeare adaptations are not intended to replace or supplant the original works. Instead, they are meant to introduce new readers to Shakespeare's plays and to make them more accessible to a wider audience. Even if the Shakespearean text is abridged and words are replaced by images, the potential for interpretation may be even higher since words open the main meaning path, and images spark imagination and, hence, the interpretation potential. I would even go further and say that by correlating image and text, the readers' minds may generate new meanings which have not been apparent while just reading the text of the plays, so this particular blend between words and pictures may not be at all confining the process of multiple meanings generation.

In this sense, even those readers who might have felt intimidated by the Shakespearean complexity of meanings revealed only to the initiated ones might feel inspired and encouraged to be meaning creators, to find their own meaning sometimes and to find then the pleasure of reading Shakespeare.

4.4. Manga generally focuses on characters

In many ways, this focus on characters is one of the strengths of manga since manga authors create compelling and relatable characters and readers are enticed to participate first-hand in the resonant and impactful story.

It is also true that Shakespeare's plays derive their charm from the poetry of lines, from the unique intertwining of words; however, let us not forget that Shakespeare is the creator of strong, surprising and unique personalities. So then, perhaps the manga medium would be the best way to convey the full concept of personality as Shakespeare saw it. In the same vein, what is intriguing in the manga Shakespeare volumes is the way we are drawn towards emotional participation in the story, by the characters' faces and by the other signals of expressiveness, at the same time as we are drawn away from that participation through the appearance on

the page of Shakespeare's lines, the language and formal elements of the text, now "mangafied" (Grande 2010: 16).

Ultimately, let us face the truth: it is all up to readers, and while some will enjoy the focus on characters and find it to be a key part of what makes manga appealing, others will go for a more balanced approach that incorporates a variety of storytelling elements. In this respect, manga Shakespeare seems to cater for all tastes.

4.5. Changing the original context - technology in manga

There are entire manga series that rely on technology and its impact on the modern world. These are the so-called *mecha* series which showcase either super-robots or realistic robots piloted by the characters in the stories.

Since this is beyond the scope of the present study, we turn now to another occurrence of technology in manga, this time one that also appears in Shakespeare manga. We are referring here to the background story which might be set in a dystopian or cyberpunk context, with a view to warning against or just displaying the effects of advanced technology in the modern world.

From this perspective, if we manage to go past the initial shock of, for instance, seeing Hamlet using a plug-in port in his hand, technology is an important element of many manga stories, and it can serve a variety of purposes, from creating a futuristic setting to exploring the impact of technology on society and individuals. Also, the use of technology in manga is often highly imaginative and creative, and it can help to create rich and immersive storytelling experience, turning it more appealing and relatable to the younger generation.

4.6. The layout, and not the words, acts as story-teller

This is a general feature displayed by manga in general, which could become problematic when it comes to manga Shakespeare in particular.

When we speak about manga, nothing is random. In fact, as it is an interweaving between words and images, it is not only words that tell the story, and perhaps, oftentimes, it is the graphics that speak louder in the case of manga volumes. Hence, as previously mentioned, the need for visual literacy is indisputable. From this perspective, the experience of manga comes very close to the experience of movie-watching. However, the advantage with manga is that one can always go back, re-experience favourite passages, or make sense of everything at their own pace. And, more than that, it is not just about images, but also about the arrangement of images on each page, namely the layout.

The main instrument of a manga illustrator is the panel. The arrangement or layout of panels in manga is of utmost importance and it can be perceived as a sort of alternative syntax, or a syntax that comes to complete the speech and the image syntax. The size of panels will be significant, as a larger panel might suggest pacing down the action or focusing on a certain feeling or key moment, while a smaller panel, or even a succession of smaller panels might indicate a quicker pace of action. Just the same, the layout can supply information on the mindset of the characters, on their feelings and thoughts. The presence of speech bubbles is self-explanatory, of course, but the presence of thought bubbles is something that decodes the action and

the mind of the characters at a deeper level. Furthermore, a wide-angle panel might introduce the reader to the context and the setting of the plot, while a close-up panel will immerse the reader into the character's mind and soul as it emphasizes the thoughts and feelings which may not be apparent at first sight. Manga Shakespeare makes plentiful use of all these specificities that the genre owns.

It goes without saying then, that the plethora of visual cues that manga artwork displays cannot be fully appreciated unless the reader possesses cultural competence, a particular sort of visual literacy, and a multi-tasking capability. There is nothing easy about this plural experience of manga reading which basically consists of comprehending the meaning of words, the symbolism of panels' layout and the significance of the elements in the panels themselves, all of which complement each other like instruments in a complex symphony.

To conclude, for now, the attempt at dismantling the main objections that might be raised to the authenticity, usefulness and quality of manga adaptations in general, and manga Shakespeare, in particular, leads us to the only possible conclusion here: we cannot reinforce enough the idea that manga Shakespeare serves as an intermediary that allows readers to engage with Shakespeare from two distinct perspectives. On the one hand, it represents a high-cultural manifestation of Britishness and traditional literary studies. On the other hand, it assumes the role of a trendy and increasingly popular symbol of youth culture. This concept of *double access*, as articulated by Jostein Gripsrud (1989), encompasses the ironic distance achieved by simultaneously engaging with both high and popular culture and proves to be a valuable tool for unravelling the hermeneutic challenges presented by manga Shakespeare. Gripsrud's concept provides an insightful framework for understanding the multi-faceted nature of manga Shakespeare and its ability to bridge the gap between high and popular culture.

The following section follows naturally from the previous attempt of dismantling the preconceptions surrounding the quality of manga Shakespeare. With the support of three different manga productions of the same Shakespearean play – *Hamlet* – we shall try to prove that, beyond a shadow of a doubt, such re-visitations are worthy successors of a famous original, and serve as magnet for the younger generation to approach the Bard from a more familiar angle.

5. Three manga editions – an overview

The first *Hamlet* manga edition that we will be referring to is part of a series of fourteen Shakespearean plays published in manga form, between 2007-2009, in the United Kingdom by Self Made Hero.

The publisher of the SMH Manga Shakespeare series, Emma Hayley, confesses that the primary aim of the series was “to introduce teenagers or first-time readers to the work of William Shakespeare via a medium they understood” (2010: 4). Also, the idea was to use these volumes more for entertainment than as an educational aid.

In *Hamlet* (2007, 195 pp), the original Shakespearean text was preserved, but in an abridged form, since, as the publisher asserts, the point of the medium is to show, not so much to tell. To the end of ensuring that the abridged text maintains its

consistency and fluidity, the editor hired Nick de Somogyi as textual consultant. The reliability of his assistance is confirmed by the fact that he was founding editor for the Globe Quartos series, author of *Shakespeare's Theatre of War* and editor (since 2001) of Nick Hern Books' Shakespeare Folios series. Further on, the success of the series is supported by the talents of experienced adaptor Richard Appignanesi (well-known for the graphic volumes in the Introducing Series), and a team of UK-based comic artists and illustrators. Brief biodata for each of these is provided at the end of each volume, after a one-page summary of the play's plot and another one-page summary of Shakespeare's life.

Although in the original format, manga reads from right to left, the publisher decided that it would be more beneficial for the series to read from left to right, as readers would expect something they are accustomed to.

Another thing audiences expect is to have manga in black and white, a thing the series complies with, except for the very first few colour pages which are meant to familiarize the reader with the setting and the characters. Unlike the original Shakespearean play though, there is no division into acts and scenes and the play runs novel-like from beginning to end.

The illustrators of the series produced alternative, futuristic or contemporary settings for each of the volumes in the series, a thing which might seem far-fetched at first-sight, but at closer inspection, proves to be a clue to Shakespeare's perpetuity. For instance, in *Hamlet*, we are abruptly introduced to the imaginary setting: "The year is 2017. Global climate change has devastated the earth. This is now a cyberworld in constant dread of war. Prince Hamlet of Denmark has come home to face an uncertain future..." (2007: 1).

However, throughout the volume, there is no insistence whatsoever upon this futuristic setting, the reader does not get to see more than this statement, and this is perhaps an indication that the setting was intended as a marker of originality and universality of the plot, and the reverence to the original play is foregrounded. Probably, the very few hints to the futuristic setting can be found in the means of communication the characters employ (video screens and holographs, instead of letters), the ports displayed in their skin, with no obvious technical indication of how plugs may work (we just see Hamlet reading Ophelia's messages through such a plug-in). The purpose then was not that of expanding ideas on a possible warning as to the threat of a robotized future or environmental issues; it was more about setting the entire series apart from other manga Shakespeare attempts, and also finding common ground with younger generations of readers.

Concurrently, Wiley Press, based in the USA, published a series of four Shakespeare as Manga volumes. The *Hamlet* volume (2008, 185pp) is structured naturally, with a similar-to-the-original Table of contents, and then an introduction by the author, preceded by brief biodata of both the author and the illustrator. We find out the author's (Adam Sexton) academic and writing background, as well as the illustrator's experience in graphic and visual arts (Tintin Pantoja).

The foreword by the author, felicitously entitled *Suit the Action to the Word: Shakespeare and Manga*, opens with a short mapping of Shakespearean adaptations including modern stage productions, movies, ballets and operas. Starting from the assumption that manga represents a natural medium for Shakespeare, Sexton

continues by explaining that manga is probably “*more* visual than a stage production of one of Shakespeare’s plays” (2008: 2). The possibilities then are infinite and they heavily rely on the illustrator’s artistry. The author even goes as far as to assert that manga may be a more affordable medium than a stage production, given the fleeting nature of words in the latter and the permanent nature of the written word for the former: “turning the pages of a manga version of one of Shakespeare’s plays is something like reading the text of that play while attending a performance, but at one’s own pace” (2008: 3).

Although admittedly a shorter version of the original play, since words, lines, speeches (not the soliloquies), even scenes are cut off, authenticity is ensured by the fact that Shakespeare’s language is not paraphrased, cuts are not so much synoptic as they are directorial, so “everything you read in The Manga Editions was written by William Shakespeare himself” (ibidem).

Just like its British counterpart, this manga reads from left to right, but unlike it, the Wiley version follows the original division into acts, not into scenes though. Just like SMH, the Wiley edition presents itself in the shape of authentic manga, in layout, size, and graphic technique, with characters intended, apparently, for a younger audience. As a matter of fact, “Horatio in Hamlet, for instance, looks like Harry Potter in tights” (Alexander & Lupton 2009: 86).

And thirdly, there is the most recent manga edition of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, published in 2022, in Canada, by Manga Classics Publishing House. It is formatted as a standard manga and so it reads from right to left, it is the longest of the three versions (469 pp), it divides the story into acts and scenes, and it has quite a complex structure. It includes a synoptic character page, followed by the contents page and an instructions page on how to read manga. The editorial team, made up of Julien Choy (graphic artist), Crystal S. Chan (story adapter) and Michael Barltrop (modern English adaptor), make their voices heard at the end of the volume. The artist’s talent is displayed in a two-page character design sketchbook, showcasing hair designs, body postures and facial expressions of characters, meant to familiarize the reader with the graphic specificity of characters’ delineation. What follows is a brief biodata of the editorial team, and a two-page long note by the modern English adaptor who explains, in a clear eight-step division, the adaptation process through which the original play is converted into a more “engaging, readable, modern English version” (2022: 2). The next pages are editorial explanations introducing the reader to the manga genre through specific, particular means; even if more fragmented in appearance than the editor’s notes in the other two editions, these notes here are quite to the point, and targeted towards several specific aspects of the adaptations: the “to be or not to be” monologue, the illustrations which offer this monologue a multiplicity of possibilities for interpretation, the negotiations between the story adapter and the illustrator, all of which provides a more personal touch to the entire editorial work, and hence, to the perception the reader should have of that. This perception should also rely on the reader’s previous knowledge of this manga series, since this volume comes fourth in the series, and so, “If you’ve read any of the others, then you know about my approach for adapting the script for a play – this time, I want to focus on my experiences in adapting the unique features of *Hamlet*” (2022: 9), as the adapter bluntly asserts.

6. To be or not to be manga?

From the three editions described above, Hamlet's most famous soliloquy has been excerpted for illustration, since it faithfully represents the treatment that each edition affords the original play. We shall therefore observe the alterations operated on the original, the loss, if any, the gain, if any, and perhaps where the new form really makes a difference.

Self Made Hero

Text (pages 78–79)	Graphics (sample, pg 78)
<p>To be, or not to be, that is the question: To die, to sleep; To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub... the dread of something after death, puzzles the will, Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all, sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, enterprises lose the name of action.</p>	

Expanding over only two pages, with a mere six speech bubbles, this version is delivering, as promised, a faithful to the original, although heavily abridged version of the original monologue.

As far as the graphics are concerned, the first page shows Hamlet, in a troubled, abandoned posture, face tormented, hair unkempt, embraced tightly and threateningly by an alter-ego Hamlet, his sword ejecting automatically from the futuristic sleeve. The second page displays a close-up on Hamlet's face and shows him shushing himself out of the tempting suicidal thought; all this, against the image of a faceless Hamlet trying to break loose from the imaginary ropes of thought which dilute any attempt to act.


Clearly, the editorial intention here was not that of focusing in any way on Hamlet's soliloquy, or of singling out this soliloquy from the entire textual weaving. The abridging technique is consistent throughout the volume, and this turns the play into a highly accessible, entertaining, dynamic story of Hamlet, while probably effacing, to a higher extent, Shakespeare's spirit.

The graphics in this volume play a significant part in decoding whatever is left unsaid through words; the almost metaphorical nature of the drawings, the

expressivity of the characters' faces, the suggestions of physical movement as well as the artistic means for conveying emotions can supplement, in many instances, the absence of words. Indeed, in this case, the page layout and the graphics will tell the story between the lines.

We also need to point out the fact that from among the three manga volumes that are of concern here, this one parts the most with the late medieval atmosphere of the original *Hamlet*. Being placed in a futuristic cyberworld, it includes hints to easily identifiable marks of such a world. And technology is such a mark. However, the unexpected use of technology in the story of Hamlet is not felt here as an editorial aim, it is never brought to the fore, and at times we even forget it serves as background for a futuristic world. It is rather employed as a creative meeting site between generations of all times, and hence, a means of rendering them all aware of the perpetuity of human nature, and of the fact that the reliance on technological devices may be just a comfortable option which does not ultimately change us, as human beings.

Wiley

Text (pages 76–80)	Graphics (sample, pg 76)
<p>To be, or not to be, that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles And by opposing end them. To die—to sleep, No more; and by a sleep to say we end The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep; To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub: For in that sleep of death what dreams may come, When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, Must give us pause—there's the respect That makes calamity of so long life. For who would bear the whips and scorns of time, The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, The pangs of despised love, the law's delay, The insolence of office, and the spurns That patient merit of the unworthy takes, When he himself might his quietus make With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear, To grunt and sweat under a weary life, But that the dread of something after death, The undiscovered country, from whose bourn No traveller returns, puzzles the will, And makes us rather bear those ills we have Than fly to others that we know not of? Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all, And thus the native hue of resolution Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, And enterprises of great pith and moment With this regard their currents turn awry And lose the name of action.</p>	 <p>TO BE, OR NOT TO BE-- THAT IS THE QUESTION. WHETHER 'TIS NOBLER IN THE MIND TO SUFFER THE SLINGS AND ARROWS OF OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE...</p>

As far as it seems, Hamlet’s soliloquy is deemed as iconic in this edition, therefore no alterations whatsoever are applied to the initial Shakespearean phrasing.

We witness here young Hamlet seated in an armchair by the fireplace, wrapped in a blanket, back turned to his audience, musingly uttering the famous words. However, what is really interesting and original about this version is that only part of the speech is uttered by Hamlet himself, with the other part given by the ghost of old King Hamlet. Graphically, this is marked with white fonts on black background for the ghost’s words, and the usual black fonts on white background for Hamlet’s words. This choice of having the speech delivered partly by the ghost is, I believe, quite logical since, on the one hand, young Hamlet bears his father’s soul in his own, the identity of names suggesting a sort of internalization of his father assumed by Hamlet. On the other hand, Hamlet contemplates the idea of suicide, that is of joining his father beyond the grave, an idea offered as quite tempting and easily achievable by the utterer of the words, the ghost.

Therefore, while the first half of the soliloquy, concentrating on the endless possibilities that the sleep of death would provide to a tormenting life, is given by the ghost, the latter half is given by Hamlet himself from the perspective of the fear of a human being who would gladly forsake the torture of life if it were not for the unchartered territory that presents itself afterwards.

The role of the visuals in this instance is significant to the point that each representation supports the words the character utters. Reading the words against the graphics, it suddenly becomes clear that Hamlet, when rhetorically wondering about the motives one would bear “the proud man’s contumely”, alludes to Polonius, to Gertrude who suffers the “oppressor’s wrong”, and to Ophelia who bears “the pangs of despised love”.

The seemingly endless row of tombstones in the graveyard serving as background for “the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns” emphasizes the imminence of death, but at the same time, Hamlet’s resolution to stand fast and fulfil his destiny.

Manga Classics

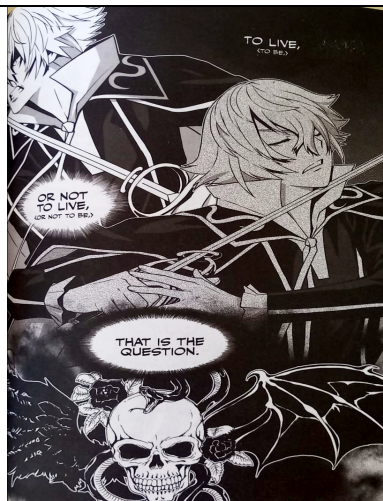
Text (pages 194–199)	Graphics (sample, pg 194)
To live (to be) or not to live (or not to be) That is the question Is it more noble to suffer through all of the pain that fate and fortune brings, or to arm yourself against your troubles and fight them until they’re gone? To die... to sleep... And when I say sleep, what I mean is the end of all my heartache and the thousand different ways that I can be hurt. That is something that I would, very much, wish for. But if I sleep, I might dream, that’s the catch. Who knows what dreams come in the sleep of	

death? We must consider what happens once we have ended our mortal life. That's why we continue to suffer our whole lives. Who would bear all of this pain and torture, All of the oppression, And the insults, The heartache of unrequited love, The corrupt legal system, Fools in power, and the way they abuse good people

When you could just end all of your problems with a dagger? Who would bear all of this, Who'd choose to suffer their entire life, if they didn't fear what came after death, that undiscovered country, from which no one ever returns, makes us think twice.

Would we rather deal with the pain we know rather than risk finding one we don't know? The fear we have of death makes us cowards, and all our desire to take action is taken away by too much thinking.

All of the things that we know we must do are pushed away by these thoughts so that we don't do anything.



Unlike any of the two previous editions, the latest one seems to be parting the most with the original Shakespearean soliloquy. It is more of a paraphrase than an abridged version, and therefore provides a sort of decoding guide for the reader, assumed as younger and perhaps less experienced.

The explicatory nature of the speech is supported by phrases such as *And when I say, What I mean, That is why*, etc, which take the metaphorical mystery out of Hamlet's speech and offers it an interesting, however unidirectional interpretation. The explicatory nature and the set interpretation are obvious in sequences that elucidate cryptic Shakespearean meanings such as: "Who knows what dreams come in the sleep of death?" or "All of the things that we know we must do are pushed away by these thoughts so that we don't do anything"

The general, abstract, multi-meaning feeling of the original speech is particularized and reduced to a highly personal experience by the use of the first person singular subject: "And when I say sleep, what I mean is the end of all my heartache and the thousand different ways that I can be hurt. That is something that I would, very much, wish for". What is interesting to note at this point would be the fact that the unidirectional interpretation the reader is rather forced into cannot be blamed on graphics (this being among the usual objections raised against manga), but on words themselves; it almost seems as if the editorial team did not quite trust either the potential for interpretation of the original Shakespearean text, or the ability of young readers nowadays to decode words in a variety of ways.

For instance, a curious if not intriguing choice is the adaptor's option for the opening line of the speech: "To live (to be) or not to live (or not to be)". The bracketed explanation, nonetheless the original Shakespearean phrase, appears as an afterthought next to the decoding key that is offered to the reader even before there

is a locked door in sight, so to say. However, given the overall paraphrasing tendency of the text, and the evident targeted readers (younger readers), it is at least consistent with everything else.

Graphically speaking too, this edition is clearly aimed at a younger audience or an audience that is visually literate and can also enjoy words: it generally looks similar to Japanese manga, with anime-like characters and facial expressions, with drawings that fill the pages to the maximum. It reads from right to left, and, out of the three versions that we have seen so far, it elicits the greatest effort to read for an uninitiated manga reader (probably the least effort for a manga and anime buff).

7. Conclusions

This study stems from a need for the acceptance of the fact that the boundaries between high and low culture are fluctuating, what is popular today may not be popular tomorrow, and the fact that while Shakespeare is relevant to scholars, so he is a reference in high culture, may be useless if he is not relevant to the majority of people, that is if he is not popular. After all, it is his indisputable initial popularity that ingrained Shakespeare's canonical place.

Admittedly, one might still argue that relevance is an intrinsic value when it comes to Shakespeare, and we will not dispute that. However, nowadays, with the fast pace of technological advancement, and the increasing visual nature of our culture, young people, in particular, are less and less inclined towards taking their time to uncover relevance in classical ways. So, the next logical step would be to give the essential, the relevant, a new wrap and let people uncover it in surprising ways. From among the multiple possibilities of unwrapping Shakespeare plays, we have chosen for the purpose of this study, the manga form, a particular sort of adaptation or *re-visitation* of the plays, a really suitable one, if only for the reason that it presents itself in a highly palatable verbal-visual complete package.

By considering for analysis the three instances excerpted from three different manga editions, we have come to realize that while being blamed for oversimplification and unidirectionality, the manga illustrations actually complete the meaning of words, and more than that, they seem to free the message from the formal conventions of phrasing, while providing potential for interpretation. And this is no little thing nowadays. Young people's minds should be sparked with interest, their creativity will immediately follow, and the ultimate purpose, that of uncovering Shakespeare's message in novel ways, will be served.

Beyond being fashionable, the manga form seems to be a necessity nowadays. While also admitting some shortcomings and without any intention of idealization, we have to say that manga creates a site for negotiation between high culture and pop culture, has immediate addressability, and affords access to the meaning of Shakespeare's plays without being overly explicit. If images speak louder than words, imagine what images together with words can do.

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Abstract

While Shakespeare, as the epitome of high culture, has been ubiquitous in the Western canon for centuries now, the gap between having him there, within easy reach, and actually accessing the meaning of Shakespeare's work grew larger and larger by the day. This study stems from a genuine need, that of making Shakespeare accessible, particularly to the younger generation, a need which has lately brought about a variety of Shakespearean adaptations, interpretations, translations. It is a plea for considering, primarily for educational purposes, a special type of Shakespearean *re-visitation*, let us call it, namely manga Shakespeare. In our increasingly visual culture, visual literacy tends to become a prerequisite, hence manga, as a form of transmedial adaptation, seems to be perfectly suitable to the transmission of Shakespeare, given that in his plays there is a sort of verbal-visual core that can be unpacked in an unexpected way in our modern times. Despite its complexity and its ability to afford *double access* (Gripsrud 1989) to high and popular culture alike, manga Shakespeare is still considered an unworthy relative of the original. Therefore, an ancillary objective of this study is that of dismantling some of the most popular objections raised to the authenticity, usefulness and quality of manga adaptations in general, by setting fragments from three editions of manga *Hamlet* (Self Made Hero 2007, Wiley 2008, and Manga Classics 2022) against the original text, observing the fresh formal and content embodiment, admitting the loss, but also the gain of achieving ideational transmission and accessibility to different times and audiences.