

SHREKSPEARE OR SHAKESPEARE GONE MANGA

Iulia Drăghici*

Although the reading of manga in Japan is not exclusively reserved to youth culture, manga exports from Japan, as well as manga produced in the European and American markets, are especially appealing to young people as a means of going against the established values of high culture. A very good and novel example of this is the “adoption” of Shakespeare by manga artists who thus provide a totally unique “interplay between two cultural systems—high and pop culture—that operate in parallel realms, two bodies of reference, sets of cultural institutions, canons of aesthetic standards, modes of constructing cultural authority”¹.

Long before globalization was coined as term and multidimensional phenomenon, about half a millennium ago, people were beginning to live in a global village where everybody knew... Shakespeare. When the Bard of Avon was only 7 the world was already shrinking. Not just because trade was bringing the continents closer every day, but also due to the cultural exchanges that were multiplying between Europe, the Americas and even Asia. English was taking its first steps towards getting the *lingua franca* status it has today. So the word got out and Great Will gained wide notoriety on all populated continents: moreover, starting in his own lifetime, Hamlet began to speak French and a number of other European vernaculars. Somebody was really *shaking* the *spear* globally!

We now live in a world gone globalized economically, but fragmented culturally. However, there is a huge renewal of interest for cultural and civilizational identities going on. And apparently Shakespeare himself went Manga in the process. Manga has emerged as one of the newest and most fashionable ways to remake Shakespeare for popular culture. The graphic reworkings of Shakespeare’s volumes provide a translation that keeps this “interplay between two cultural systems” dynamic and available for the reader.

Therefore, *Manga Shakespeare* represents a new interpretive challenge that makes the great poet of the Western literary canon get transposed into a popular modern Japanese graphic art form. *As you like it*, if you please. In Manga Shakespeare, specialists read an annulment of distinction between high culture and

* Romanian American University.

¹ Lanier, Douglas (2002) *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, Oxford: Oxford UP, p. 137

consumer culture, a contest of authority and the tendency to resist the established values of high culture². The king is dead, long live... *Shakespeare!*?

The UK-based Manga Shakespeare series³ manages the commercial interests of youth culture alongside the academic investment of high culture, setting these two “Shakespeares” side by side on the page. Although the British Manga Shakespeare is not the only graphic adaptation of Shakespeare’s plays, it is definitely one of the most artistically interesting and has gained tremendous financial success as a published graphic series. Since its beginning in 2007, it has proudly produced fourteen volumes of abridged manga versions of Shakespeare’s plays.

The Manga Shakespeare collection aims at engaging a segment of the readership market that might not be normally interested in Shakespeare. Therefore, this graphic “reinvention” of Shakespeare is seen by many educators, parents and students as the ideal way to help struggling young readers “get Shakespeare.”

Reviewers of Manga Shakespeare have emphasized the medium as notably appropriate for the adaptation of Shakespeare. A reviewer in *The Observer* writes, “This ‘manga Shakespeare’ hybrid is unlikely – but makes absolute sense . . . [it] shares similarities with Shakespeare’s theatre, relying heavily on recurring image and highly expressive gestures.”

One critic in the *Financial Times* even puts forward that “A cartoon version of Shakespeare is in some ways truer to the original than reading the text alone; the visual element was always supposed to be part of the experience.”

The *Independent on Sunday* measures the success of Manga Shakespeare with the innovative adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* by Baz Luhrmann: “This new series does in book form what film director Baz Luhrmann did on screen – make Shakespeare cool and accessible to a younger generation... [the] artists use the dynamic flow of manga to give Shakespeare’s plots an addictive page turning energy.”

But it seems that, above all, critics have highlighted the emotional appeal of Manga Shakespeare as being among the most exhilarating characteristics of this pop-culture adaptation. A reviewer in *The Times* acknowledges “how vividly manga techniques and pacing can convey motion and emotion”; and yet another reviewer of Manga Shakespeare comments that “manga is a dynamic, emotional and cinematic medium easily absorbed by the eye. Its attractive art and simple storytelling methods

² Ibid.

³ Hulbert, Jennifer, Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., and Robert L. York, eds. (2006), *Dude, Where’s My Bard? Reducing, Translating, and Referencing Shakespeare for Youth: An Introduction. Shakespeare and Youth Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p.1–41.

enthuse readers to approach Shakespeare's work in the way he intended – as entertainment.”⁴

In conclusion to our survey of Manga Shakespeare it would seem that manga is a very suitable medium for depicting characters as popular as Shakespeare's characters. 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.”⁵ In reading Manga Shakespeare, one can come across a lively interchange between high and pop culture that captivates the reader, brightening up the sometimes equivocal cultural site of meaning that we call Shakespeare.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allison, Anne (2006), *The Japan Fad in Global Youth Culture and Millennial Capitalism*, Mechademia 1: *Emerging Worlds of Anime and Manga*, Ed. Frenchy Lunning. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Gans, Herbert J. (1999), *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*, New York: Basic Books.

Hulbert, Jennifer, Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., and Robert L. York, eds. (2006), *Dude, Where's My Bard? Reducing, Translating, and Referencing Shakespeare for Youth: An Introduction.* *Shakespeare and Youth Culture*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jüngst, Heike (2008), *Translating Manga, Comics in Translation*, Ed. Federico Zanettin. Manchester, UK: St. Jerome.

Lanier, Douglas (2002), *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, Oxford: Oxford UP.

http://ourspace.uregina.ca/bitstream/handle/10294/3091/QueenCityComics-3-Troni_Grande.pdf?sequence=1 (accessed June 23, 2014).

http://www.selfmadehero.com/manga_shakespeare/publicity.html (accessed June 23, 2014).

⁴ For quotations in this paragraph, see the Press Archives on the SelfMadeHero website: http://www.selfmadehero.com/manga_shakespeare/publicity.html.

⁵ Grande, Troni (2010), “Manga Shakespeare and the Hermeneutic Problems of ‘Double Access’”, *Queen City Comics* [Online], Available at http://ourspace.uregina.ca/bitstream/handle/10294/3091/QueenCityComics-3-Troni_Grande.pdf?sequence=1 [accessed June 23, 2014]