A (Graphic) Novel Approach to Teaching Shakespeare: Embracing Non-Traditional Texts in the Secondary English Classroom

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A (Graphic) Novel Approach to Teaching Shakespeare: 
Embracing Non-Traditional Texts in the Secondary English Classroom

There are many challenges that arise when it comes to teaching Shakespeare in the secondary English classroom. These challenges may stem from varied roots, including but not limited to students’ past negative experiences with Shakespeare, difficulty with the language of Shakespeare, inability to relate to a story that is so different from modern life, and assumptions that Shakespeare is too hard to understand (Baltes, Hammer). Teaching Shakespeare to secondary students, therefore, becomes a balancing act. Teachers must work to engage students of all learning abilities, recognize and meet individual school requirements, and do all of this in an efficient manner. While these challenges are certainly not easily solved, utilizing non-traditional teaching methods, such as the graphic novel, is one way to get students engaged in and ready to tackle Shakespeare.

Shakespeare “purists,” believe that the value of Shakespeare is only gained by studying and teaching his works as they were originally written and performed—adaptation or adjustment to the original text would be a perversion of the true purpose of experiencing Shakespeare (Crowe). Others disagree with this “purist” viewpoint. “[…] when we see the “high art” of Shakespeare brought down to the level of popular culture, then Shakespeare… has the potential to be seen and practiced as he was really meant to be—his artistic ideals breathing through the daily praxis of everyday life” (Lancaster 75). While there is validity to the argument of teaching the real and pure language of Shakespeare, both purist viewpoints and non-purist viewpoints
should be taken into account when considering how to best promote student learning. There are ways to salvage the text of Shakespeare while still implementing 21st century teaching strategies in the classroom. The teaching of Shakespeare should be augmented with both purist and non-purist methods in order to engage students and allow them to gain better control over the difficult language of Shakespeare. By utilizing non-traditional texts such as the graphic novel when teaching Shakespeare, teachers can combat a variety of teaching problems while still respecting Shakespeare’s original text.

To understand a graphic novel, one must first understand the basic unit of a graphic novel—a comic strip. A comic strip is defined as, “A sequence of small drawings telling a comic or serial story in a newspaper, etc” (OED), and they look much like this comic strip from Bill Watterson’s *Calvin and Hobbes*:

Here, the story is simple as it incorporates only two characters (Calvin and his mother) and completes the comic story in only three panels (Watterson).

Extending the idea of a comic strip, a graphic novel is defined as, “A full-length [...] story published as a book in comic-strip format” (OED). Besides being simply an extension of the comic strip, though, it is suggested that, “A successful graphic novel starts with a stellar story told with words and pictures that augment the story, providing insight that text alone cannot do” (Baird 5). This augmentation is evident in a variety of ways, through a variety of graphic novels.
In many instances, the illustrations in a graphic novel allow the author to express a lot without giving much explanation. This benefit is obvious in many graphic novels, including Gene Yang’s *American Born Chinese*, and Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline*:

In these panels from *American Born Chinese*, Yang plays with the graphic novel’s ability to utilize both silence and conversation in a way that regular novels cannot. The reader can see that the main character, Jin, is eating lunch alone before other characters begin to bully him. In only a few panels, the reader learns of Jin’s isolation that appears to be a result of his Chinese heritage, as the others poke fun at his food (Yang, *American Born Chinese*). A novel would have to explain the first panel and then the conversation that follows, but the graphic novel does not waste valuable time on text descriptions and explanations.
Similarly, in this series of panels from the graphic novel adaptation of *Coraline*, little explanation is needed. It is clear, from the title character’s body language that she is not only bored, but perhaps also upset that the adult in her life (her father) will not step away from his work (Gaiman). Through the use of pictures, all of this becomes clear in only a few words.

Graphic novels are also a means to deliver emotion in a clear and straightforward manner, as evident in Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* (a study of the comic genre written in comic book form):
The immediacy aspect of the graphic novel will become particularly important in relation to the time restraints that are a challenge to all teachers. The above example shows just how quickly a student will be able to understand the ideas that are being conveyed as they read text that is enhanced with joining pictures (McCloud 118-119).

In regards to graphic novels telling the stories of Shakespeare, there are a number of options that may be utilized depending on the goals of the teacher and the students that are being taught. From Classical Comics, for example, there are three graphic novels available for studying Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. These editions include original text, plain text, and
quick text versions of the play. The differences are easy to see when viewing the same pages from each version:

**Original Text**

This sample is from the original text version and, as the name suggests, employs the text as Shakespeare originally wrote it. Here, a group meets in the woods to discuss the play that they will perform for Theseus’s marriage to Hippolyta. They decide that, in order to make the play appropriate for the noble ladies, certain elements must be altered. This is the version of the graphic novel that an upper-level high school English teacher would want to consider using. The original text allows the students to experience the language of Shakespeare through a 21st century product—a purist/non-purist compromise. Another version of the same graphic novel handles the text a little differently (Shakespeare, and McDonald… Original Text 54):
This is the plain text version of the same page from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Here, the characters speak a more modern-day English, while the text still covers each of Shakespeare’s original ideas. This would perhaps be most appropriate for teaching upper-level junior high school students or lower-level high school students—students who have previously had some exposure to Shakespeare. (Shakespeare, and McDonald… Plain Text 54).
Finally, this quick text version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* translates the Shakespeare into modern-day English and then shortens the ideas for a quicker reading (Shakespeare, and McDonald… Quick Text 54). This text could be particularly useful in a secondary English classroom with students who have had little to no experience with reading Shakespeare, or in a class where the focus of Shakespeare is simply on the themes and ideas rather than on the language.

Any of these graphic novel versions of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* could effectively be used to teach the play, and each of these versions honors the language of Shakespeare in a different way. While this paper will focus specifically on using original text versions of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to teach secondary students, other non-traditional texts could certainly be used in the secondary English classroom. Any teacher would want to consider their specific goals and expectations for teaching Shakespeare, and their own students before deciding what version of a graphic novel would be the most effective tool for students to learn from.

When considering how to relate Shakespeare to modern students, a graphic novel is perhaps a less obvious, but successful way to bridge the gap between the content of Shakespeare and the real life of a student. The Manga Shakespeare graphic novel version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a perfect example of connecting the 21st century student to the characters in a Shakespeare play. The illustrations depict the four characters (Hermia, Helena, Demetrius, and Lysander) involved in a love mix-up throughout the play as very young adults—in fact, the graphic novel makes the characters look a lot like high school aged students:
Considering the relationship issues that arise during high school: love triangles, unrequited love, loss and gain of friends, etc. it could certainly be asserted that a high school student would automatically relate to this book based on the depiction of these four main characters as teenagers. Even the original Shakespeare text seems to back up the illustrations, as characters make statements such as, “The more I love, the more he hateth me” and, “I am beloved of beauteous Hermia” (Shakespeare, and Appignanesi 5)—exaggerated statements that seem as though they could come (only slightly modified to fit modern language) from love-stricken teenagers.
Aside from helping students relate to Shakespeare’s works, these depictions of Shakespeare’s characters as young adults suggest that these graphic novel adaptations may be more authentic to Shakespeare’s original work than many other modern-day interpretations. The 1936 film version of *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, had middle-aged actors, Norma Shearer and Leslie Howard, playing the title roles intended for teenagers. Perhaps these graphic novel
adaptations of Shakespeare’s work returns *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to the portrayal that Shakespeare intended.

The nature of any graphic novel allows teenagers to better access the text based solely on the visual experience that it provides. An article written as a comic about graphic novels discusses some of the benefits of using any graphic novel in a classroom setting: “First, graphic novels are *visual*, and our students *love* visual media. After all, they’re immersed in it” (Yang, “Graphic Novels” 187). The simple cartoon nature of the graphic novel automatically allows many students to become engaged in the text, because it feels like something that is already familiar. Many graphic novels also come with aids for students. These extra features may describe the history of the play, information about The Globe Theater, or even contain instructions about creating graphic novels (Shakespeare, and McDonald… Original Text 138):
Not only can students become better engaged in the text, but now they can also be directed to create their own projects inspired by Shakespeare’s original work. As students consider the implications of visually recreating a Shakespeare play, the teacher is given ample opportunity to introduce performance, staging, costuming, and other issues that can be analyzed as students view other productions and performances in conjunction with the graphic novel.

In terms of improving language comprehension, another significant challenge that arises when teaching Shakespeare (Hammer), graphic novels may be one of the most practical ways to get students involved in reading the actual text of Shakespeare while still understanding the meaning of the words and the overall plot of the play. In both the Manga Shakespeare and John McDonald versions of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, it is easy to distinguish between the real and the fantastical. The juxtaposition between reality and magic plays a vital role in understanding and interpreting the play—and even just by seeing a visual depiction of the characters, it becomes much easier to notice the differences:
The pointed ears of Titania, and the horns of Oberon, for example, not only give the reader an immediate cue that these are fantastical characters (King and Queen of the fairies), but the wicked-looking eyes of both indicate that they may become devious or playful characters (Shakespeare, and McDonald… Original Text 31).
Suddenly, the reader has visual signals that give them a clearer understanding of the nature and attitude of each character (Shakespeare, and Appignanesi 6).

Another benefit of using any graphic novels in the classroom is the “visual permanence” that they hold. Time progresses only as quickly as your eyes move across the page… The rate of information-transfer is firmly in your control” (Yang, “Graphic Novels” 188)! With the help of a graphic novel, students are gaining control over a text that, perhaps, once seemed foreign and uninteresting to them. They have the ability to read the original Shakespeare text while viewing images at a rate that is comfortable for them. Students are used to rapid-fire instruction and entertainment. By allowing students the opportunity to self-time their reading and comprehension, teachers will open up new worlds from their students when it comes to pursuing learning outside of the classroom. Teachers may promote life-long learning for their students from this simple act of making a Shakespeare text engaging and accessible.

Graphic novels are not the first non-traditional method that has proven to assist those students dealing with reading and language comprehension barriers. One teacher discusses the success that learning disabled students encountered as Bob Ives, an experienced Shakespearean actor and director, prepared students to perform plays including A Midsummer Night’s Dream (Johnson 45). Here, the teacher cites “students [becoming] an active part of the process rather than passive recipients of ‘words without thoughts’ (Hamlet 3.2.97)” as one of the obvious reasons that Ives was so successful in helping ADHD and dyslexic students access the language of Shakespeare (Johnson 48). Similarly, becoming an active part in the process of reading a graphic novel is sure to have the same positive effects on learning disabled students. “By combining image and text, graphic novels bridge the gap between media we watch and media we read. Image and text share narrative responsibility. Because of this, many teachers have found
great success using graphic novels with ELL students and struggling readers” (Yang 187). When working to decode the language of Shakespeare, don’t we all feel like struggling readers? By using a graphic novel version of a Shakespeare play, students have all the benefits of visual images while still being immersed as an “active part” of the original Shakespeare text (Yang, “Graphic Novels” 187). Further visual benefits, such as the bolding of specific words in McDonald’s graphic novel version would continue to assist learning disabled students throughout their entire reading process.

In the above panels, when Egeus (father of Hermia) exclaims, “My noble lord, this man hath my consent to marry her… and, my gracious duke, this man hath bewitch’d the bosom of
my child” (Shakespeare and McDonald 9), the bolded letters help to point out important words that are worth knowing, and it may even provide hints about the tone of Egeus’ words for students who would otherwise have a difficult time in picking up these subtleties while reading (Shakespeare, and McDonald...Original Text 9).

While using a non-traditional text can clearly be beneficial in the classroom, particularly when dealing with something, such as Shakespeare, that may be difficult for students to access, it is important to remember that non-traditional methods are not always the preferred or the most beneficial way to teach students. Using a new method, such as a graphic novel, without putting any thought behind the purpose for using that method is time wasted. To decide what method will be used to teach Shakespeare, a teacher should consider the problems that individual students may have with such an unfamiliar text, and if graphic novels could combat these problems then they should be used to teach with purpose.

Many teachers struggle with the issue of balancing the teaching of traditional texts with teaching through less traditional methods. One teacher shares her success as she worked to fuse popular culture into her writing assignments, and she explains, “[...] at the end of my time with my students, what matters is that they have grown as thinkers and as writers. They can always go back and read Jane Eyre, but the chance to become a successful writer in my English class only lasts a year” (Falkner 49). The same logic should be applied to the teaching of Shakespeare. When students leave the classroom, they should leave with positive experiences—whether related to the language of Shakespeare, the context of Shakespeare, or something else entirely—that will push them to pursue a career of life-long learning. Through the use of non-traditional texts, such as graphic novels, teachers can resolve the challenges of teaching Shakespeare in their own class. Whether students struggle with engaging in the text, the difficult language, lack of
time, or a learning disability, it is possible to teach the original text of Shakespeare in an exciting and meaningful way.
Works Cited


