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PRACTICE

“As Palpable As This Which Now I Draw”: Getting Graphic with *Macbeth*

JOSEPH HAUGHEY

A Shakespearean play is no cadaver, useful for an autopsy. It is a living, vibrant entity that has the power of grasping us by the hand and leading us up onto a peak in Darien. “But I can’t understand Shakespeare,” says the high-school boy. “It takes a gray-bearded professor to know what he is talking about.” You are wrong, Johnny. It’s the gray beard that you can’t understand. He has asked you to read Shakespeare with a pair of glasses smoked to a dull and dingy gray. Take them off. It was written for you, for the groundlings, for the unscholarly Globe patrons who walked in from the cock-fight on the street. Only those folks whose blood courses hot through their veins can understand these tingling lines. Shakespeare said everything—brain to belly, every mood and minute of a man’s season. His language is starlight and fire-flies and the sun and moon. He wrote it with tears and blood and beer, and his words march like heartbeats.

—Orson Welles, *English Journal*, 1938

It was initially my eighth-graders’ idea. They wanted to invite the principal and other teachers, any who weren’t teaching that period, as well as any other adults willing to listen, and host a reflective discussion on their recent study of *Macbeth*, a meta-analysis of their learning shared before an audience. It’s rare that students are exposed to *Macbeth* in eighth grade, as it tends historically to be a senior high text, and in most districts remains so still today; I was permitted, though, through collaboration with our high school’s English teachers, to teach it to my two sections of eighth-grade honors English, and it proved an ideal introductory tragedy for my gifted middle school students.

In class, I experimented with a number of performance-based strategies—working through various potential stage portrayals of Lady Macbeth, comparing different film interpretations of the three witches, and even performing scenes complete with homemade costumes and dollar store props—but what my students most wanted to talk about were the

graphic adaptations of *Macbeth* they had explored in a number of lessons. They decided early in their planning not to call them “comic books,” instead preferring the more dignified “graphic adaptation.” Both the students and I felt the need to defend what we had been doing. No other teachers had used such texts in our school before, and we wanted to show everybody what we had been doing, laying out a rebuttal for the unwritten rules we felt we had broken before we were even brought to trial.

“In the Times Past”: Historical Takes on Comics and Graphic Adaptations in English Class

Such anxieties were not unfounded. Teachers have been debating what to do with graphic texts for nearly eighty years. A look through the annals of *English Journal* reveals that as early as the 1940s there were teachers complaining about their students’ interest in comic books. Robert Cadigan, for example, a Pennsylvania teacher, lamented in 1940 that his students, given a choice, “would read only Superman comic books” (p. 627). In 1946, Edward Dias, a Massachusetts high school teacher writing of the “current comic-book craze,” complained that he had “been plagued by comic-book enthusiasts in [his] classroom,” and offered like-minded teachers lists of high-interest texts that could be suggested in place of comics (p. 142).

Similar critiques appeared in the fifties and sixties as well, though apologists for the genre also began to pepper the pages of *English Journal*. An Indiana teacher, Herman O. Makey, for example, advocated in 1952 that though many comic books might be of poor literary quality, teachers needed to remain open to the virtues of the genre, arguing that “good pictures wedded to good words may be superior to either” (p. 548).

In the current century, educational scholarship tends almost exclusively to support methodologies that make use of graphic novels and adaptations in the English classroom, though like me, such scholarship acknowledges suspicious

administrators and stalwart teachers skeptical of such strategies. In *Building Literacy Connections With Graphic Novels* (2007), James Bucky Carter outlines the history of these debates and argues that “there is a graphic novel for virtually every learner ... from students who ‘just like to look at the pictures’ to those who are prepared for a heady academic challenge” (p. 1). Writing that “more research needs to be conducted on almost every aspect of using graphic novels,” Carter solicits more “practitioner-based essays detailing use of graphic novels in actual classrooms” (p. 21). His call became an

I worried, though, because my students were not reluctant readers, and they did not struggle in school. Quite the opposite, these were our school’s honors students; in a school of almost five hundred, these forty-five students had been deemed our best and brightest. They were serious about their own learning and resented past experiences that had not challenged them intellectually.

Would the students themselves rebuke my graphic adaptations as juvenile and childish? The adults in their lives were equally serious. What would parents say? What would other

From CLASSICAL COMICS MACBETH © 2008 Illustrated by Jon Haward. Reprinted by permission of Heinle ELT. All rights reserved.

impetus for my own decision to record my early experience using graphic adaptations of *Macbeth* in my classes.

It was December when my students and I scheduled our talk, about a week before the holiday break. I had attended the annual NCTE convention just before Thanksgiving, looking for fresh and innovative strategies to invigorate my teaching. A number of sessions there had promoted the use of graphic novels and adaptations in schools, arguing their virtues for bridging the literacy gap and making challenging texts accessible to reluctant readers. I was excited to try some of their ideas with my students, and I returned to school energized, my arms full of new books for my classroom, including several copies each of five graphic adaptations of *Macbeth*.

teachers say? What would the principal think of her second-year English teacher, entrusted with the school’s sharpest students, when she walked in to class and found him teaching from “comics”?

"I Pray You, School Yourself": Five Graphic Adaptations of *Macbeth*

I need not have worried about my students. They were won over easily. Already immersed in a digital multimedia world that seamlessly blends text with sounds, images, and videos, they easily set aside the traditional school texts and embraced these new versions of Shakespeare. My students

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particularly raved about the vibrant images that the Classical Comics *Macbeth*, illustrated by Jon Haward, hailing its vivid color. Students argued that its illustrations enlivened their study of Shakespeare, in similar manner to a well-done theatrical production. Classical Comics offers three different versions of their *Macbeth*: an "Original Text," a "Plain Text," which has been translated into modern-day English; and a "Quick Text," in which the modern translation is reduced to make Shakespeare's language even more accessible. Students agreed that the "Original Text" was most suitable for their needs. They preferred it over William Shakespeare's *Macbeth: The Graphic Novel* (illustrated by Tony Leonard Tamai) and *No Fear Shakespeare Graphic Novels Macbeth* (illustrated by Ken Hoshine), both of which they felt lacked the intensity of the Classical Comics version.

Amulet Books's *Manga Shakespeare Macbeth* (illustrated by Robert Deas) and Wiley Publishing's *Macbeth: The Manga Edition* (illustrated by Adam Sexton, Eve Grandt, and Candice Chow) were also popular, especially with some of my female students. Several girls in the class had an interest already in manga and were excited to see these texts as an option for study in school.

Whereas American comic publishers have historically marketed their products to adolescent males, manga tends to be popular in Japan with both girls and boys, and also with both adults and adolescents. As a result, manga artists often blur boundaries between female and male interests, and also between adult and teen issues in ways American comics shy away from. This results in manga texts oftentimes seeming more violent than their American counterparts. In this softening of gender and age distinctions, though, manga serves as an ideal instrument stylistically for staging Shakespeare. There are a number of different manga graphic adaptations of Shakespeare's plays

today, and these various texts, including the two I introduced to my eighth-graders, intertwine rich Japanese artistic traditions and Eastern interpretations of Shakespeare in the same vein as Akira Kurosawa's 1957 *Throne of Blood*, which sets the story of *Macbeth* in feudal Japan. Such non-Western creative readings of Shakespeare, in art and film, offer American students a more diverse and complex contextual backdrop for study than Western interpretations alone.

Sexton, in his introduction, calls *Macbeth* "particularly manga-worthy," and comparing his illustrations to stage

Shakespeare, defends manga as an optimal medium for the play:

Onstage, the scene that takes place in the witches' cave, with its child apparitions and parade of Banquo's descendants, can easily fail to convince. Not here. The same goes for *Macbeth*'s many murders; when one character chops off another's head, in a manga it is very much that head on a sword in the following scene, and not a facsimile devised by the props department. A manga provides the literalness—the "gore" that *Macbeth* himself refers to, in describing the scene of King Duncan's murder—that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* cries out for. By no means do we miss out on the play's poetry, however. Manga makes room for both. (p. 4)

Students bought into these arguments. They loved

the bold imagery and the creative depictions of Shakespeare's characters that manga adaptations offered.

"Such an Instrument I was to Use": Student Graphic Adaptations

I did not limit my students just to reading graphic adaptations of Shakespeare; I also had them create their own graphic adaptations of selected scenes as part of a popular

From SHAKESPEARE'S *MACBETH: THE MANGA EDITION* © 2008 by Adam Sexton, Eve Grandt, and Candice Chow. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing. All rights reserved.

mid-unit assignment. They had a number of options. Students lacking the confidence to create their own full-color graphic adaptation of a scene from the play instead added color to a series of nineteenth-century Frank Howard black-and-white illustrations that I had scanned from my own collection for the purpose. The black-and-white Hoshine and Sexton graphic adaptations also provided ample scenes to this end. This pushed many students outside of their comfort zones. Reading graphic adaptations was one thing; creating them another. Everybody participated, though, and some of my more artistic students had opportunities to share their talents and creativity in ways rarely afforded in their typical classroom experience.

These projects pushed students to think carefully about how Shakespeare's language would dictate their work; they were required to defend the choices they made. What instructions did Shakespeare provide about placement of characters and props? What hints did he offer about an appropriate setting and in what ways could these be interpreted thematically? What mood did the rhythms of the language create and how would students capture that sense in their work? What colors best depicted those sensations? After completion, their art was displayed on the classroom walls, and in a gallery walk, students were asked to critique and evaluate the work of their peers. What had they done well in capturing Shakespeare's language? What background details were included that demonstrated consideration of the text (e.g. one student included carefully detailed ingredients of the witches' cauldron in her work based on her close reading; another took great pains in giving his their beards that *Macbeth* mentions in 1.3). Given that most of us were not gifted artists—though a handful of my students certainly did have above-average artistic ability—student reviewers were instructed to keep their comments positive.

With my students convinced, though, I started to feel skeptical again. Did they only prefer this approach to Shakespeare because it was easier? Were these methods rigorous enough? I worried that Shakespeare's language, the central object in any academic study of Shakespeare, might become lost for some of my students against the backdrop of the pictures. Was I dumbing down our study, trading genuine and rewarding, albeit difficult, textual interpretation for uninspired picture gazing?

I again turned to my students for answers. They themselves, when pushed to think critically about their textual preference, argued eloquently that the illustrations did not undermine the beauty and elegance of the language, but

instead helped provide a deeper and clearer vision of Shakespeare's words. Through discussion, they were aware that there were competing graphic interpretations; not all of the graphic adaptations depicted Shakespeare's words the same way, and their differences provided opportunities for rich discussion about the language of the play and evaluation of the choices varying artists had made in their illustrations.

"Your Face, My Thane, is as a Book": Comparing Competing Graphic Interpretations

Haward, in the Classical Comics versions, for example, portrays the witches with wart-covered, green skin; dirty, white, unkempt hair held in place with bones; pointed teeth; and red, devilish eyes. They wear hooded brown cloaks and dance wildly about their cauldron. Students, especially in their first encounters with Shakespeare, approach the plays with assumptions about how characters should be presented, and are comforted, whether in film or in art, when actors and artists play to those assumptions. They want Shakespeare's fairies, ghosts, and witches to match their Disney-centric expectations.

Classroom comparisons of various artists' differing depictions of the supernatural, though, challenge such preconceived notions. This was true in our study. Haward's Wizard-of-Oz-stylized witches provided a safe and easy entry point while other adaptations took more dramatic risks, playing with characterization and setting, creating alternate artistic perceptions of the play, much like enterprising and radical stage productions.

Hoshine, for example, in the *No Fear Shakespeare Graphic Novels: Macbeth* draws the witches with blindfolds covering their eyes. These blindfolds are never removed. Such illustration lends itself to a number of critical questions. Does the text support blindfolding the witches? Does it matter whether the text supports it and why; when is an artist free to stray from the text in his or her interpretation and when is he or she bound by Shakespeare's language? How is being blind different from being blindfolded? Have the witches blindfolded themselves willingly or does some other force impose their constraint? If willingly, what does this suggest about their character? If unwillingly, then what forces in the story (i.e. Hecate perhaps?) control them and why would those forces choose to remove their sight? These questions drove classroom discussion, as the class analyzed Shakespeare's text and the significance of "vision," both literally and figuratively.

In Deas's manga depiction, the three witches are green reptilian sentients with yellow, piercing eyes. Their eyebrows stretch as wide as their shoulders. They wear traditional Japanese robes and float above the ground, literally "hover[ing] through the fog and filthy air." Their long brown hair flows above them, oblivious to the laws of gravity. In the background stand two decrepit grey skyscrapers, one fallen partially on the other. In the rubble, at their base, lay the corpses of soldiers. Likewise, Tamai's futuristic setting is startling. His witches are robotic, clad in steel and metal. Macbeth's starship armor looks like something from a science fiction movie. How do such non-human portrayals of the witches against an otherwise human cast both support and undermine Shakespeare's script?

In Sexton, Grandt, and Chow's manga depiction, the three witches are again portrayed as human, but with juxtaposing ages. The first witch is young

and alluring, with blonde hair, a petite nose, and seductive lips and eyes. The second shows the features of middle age, while the third witch is aged and wrinkled. Her lips are cracked and her teeth uneven. Her hands are claw-like, with curved, sharp fingernails. These depictions also lead to critical questions. How does the first witch's youth challenge our notions of evil and witchcraft? Does it make it more or

less appealing? In what ways does age play a larger role in the overall plot and in our own culture?

Macbeth has been called by some critics Shakespeare's tragedy of middle age. In one recent 2006 film adaptation, starring Sam Worthington, inappropriate at the secondary level, though, because of nudity, but worth mentioning nonetheless, the three witches are cast as seductive, but sinister, young women. In a 2010 film adaptation, starring Patrick Stewart, based on his stage production of the play, several scenes of which are ideal for school use, the three witches are portrayed as nurses, seeming initially in several scenes to aid injured soldiers only later to violently take their lives. In what ways do these depictions challenge our expectations? A nurse is a symbol of healing and safety; to make her a killer defies ingrained conceptions of modern gender and occupation roles. It is easy to classify and accept characters when they fit into neat, organized stereotypical molds, but more difficult when they break from them. The question then becomes, what does Shakespeare's text suggest about the witches, what

clues does he provide, and how can these be depicted, whether graphically, on stage, or in another medium, in ways that push us to re-conceive both Shakespeare and our perceptions of self and culture?

"A Time For Such a Word": The Big Day Arrives

As our class discussions evolved, they also often developed into an analysis of the stigma associated with the reading of comics and graphic adaptations in our country. Students, like me, were aware that parents and other teachers might wrinkle their noses at our inclusion of graphic adaptations in our study of *Macbeth*. Nobody's parents had studied Shakespeare this way, as far as we knew at least. And nobody had ever before studied graphic adaptations in any of their prior English classes.

None of us felt, though, that we were moving in the wrong direction. What we were doing was right. We imagined that we were part of a shift in education, and that we were on the precipice of something innovative. Everybody should study Shakespeare this way. Shakespeare's words were still challenging, but they were coming to life in ways none of us, including myself, had considered before we began our study. We knew, though, that there were others who would need convincing. Nobody had actually said anything disparaging about our work thus far, but the class felt so strongly that what we were doing was right, that we determined we needed to be proactive in our defense. That was when the idea was born. It was the youngest boy in the class, usually introverted, but who had taken particular relish as the second witch in a classroom performance activity in throwing the various "poison'd entrails" into the cauldron, who first suggested it. This conversation would not be for us, though. It would be for anybody who might disagree with us. We did not need to be convinced; they did.

Most of our invited guests arrived on time on the appointed day. A couple, including the principal, wandered in a few minutes late. They all had encouraging words to say, though, and at least superficially, offered their support. Extra chairs were brought in and a space was made where a number of students sat on the floor. The event was a success. A different student introduced each of the five graphic adaptations we had consulted in class. This was followed by an enclosed discussion over the next ten minutes between the class members, a handful of questions raised by different students and commented on by his or her peers, on the experience of using these adaptations in class and an analysis

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of their appropriateness for our study. The conversation mirrored our earlier discussions that had inspired the day's event. We were not really saying anything that we ourselves had not said before. Next, we opened our talk to include our guests.

Their replies and insights were warm and constructive. Several asked questions of their own. It was not an overwhelming victory, but we had made our case. There were still those who remained doubtful of such methods, as I learned later over the course of several lunch periods in the teacher lounge, but the overall reply remained positive. Like me, some questioned whether or not the approach would have a lasting appeal once the novelty wore off. Others wondered whether giving students pictures was preventing them from forming their own vision of Shakespeare's play, replaced instead with the preconceptions of a given artist, or set of artists, an almost maddening challenge founded on the opinion that it is somehow cheating for students to see and hear plays rather than imagining everything as they read.

In the years that followed, I continued to use graphic adaptations in my teaching, though future classes never felt the need to defend themselves as that first class did. Neither did I. There were never any vocal detractors at our school. Today, my graphic adaptations are worn after just a few years of student use, their pages showing the signs of wear from dozens of sets of eyes and fingers. The bindings have become loose and some of the pages are missing from those first volumes. In one, Deas's manga interpretation, Macbeth now sports a yellow highlighter goatee, the work of some student apparently either bored with my newfangled approaches or who simply believed the images required some embellishment. Ironically, the more traditional, though older, school texts of *Macbeth* still look relatively new.

I am certain my students would have been successful in their first study of Shakespeare with or without graphic adaptations. They were all capable students and there was little any teacher could have done to have kept them from doing well. In studying literature, though, particularly Shakespeare, traditional methods of assessing student success—essays, tests, projects—often fail in measuring authentic student engagement and interest. There is a breed of student who can ace almost any test but do so without relish, without ever giving any of their own spirit or energy to the study.

In this age of Common Core State Standards and increased emphasis on standardized test results that focus on basic skills but do little to measure student creativity and invention, our highest achieving students excel on paper but are not always challenged. Their unique needs are often ignored

in a curriculum that increasingly emphasizes mediocrity. A student's first classroom encounter with Shakespeare should serve to instill a lifelong love of the Bard, not just fill their head with knowledge necessary to pass a test, and every consequent encounter should bolster that love. Graphic adaptations can be one tool toward that end. Whether an honors, traditional, or remedial class, if a student's first encounter can imbue a desire to return to the Bard later in life, or minimally at least avoid engendering a distaste for further study, if later teachers can introduce future units of Shakespeare to a buzz in the room instead of a groan, then we have done something right in our classes, something difficult to measure, but perhaps more significant than what can be measured.

One of my students from that first class went on to high school to become an avid actress and even performed in a national high school Shakespeare speaking competition. We have stayed in touch and she wrote to me recently that her experience in my class was the impetus for her love of theater and Shakespeare. She had done well on the test, of course, but she has done something much greater with her talent and interest too. Graphic adaptation played some part in that success.

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