

## REVIEWS

### “THE PLAY’S THE THING”— REALLY: MANGA SHAKESPEARE

William Shakespeare, Adam Sexton, Tintin Pantoja. *Shakespeare’s Hamlet, The Manga Edition*. February 2008. (ISBN: 978-0-470-09757-1)

William Shakespeare, Adam Sexton, Hyeondo Park. *Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, The Manga Edition*. February 2008. (ISBN: 978-0-470-09760-1)

William Shakespeare, Adam Sexton, Eve Grandt, Candice Chow. *Shakespeare’s Macbeth, The Manga Edition*. February 2008. (ISBN: 978-0-470-09759-5)

William Shakespeare, Adam Sexton, Yali Lin. *Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, The Manga Edition*. February 2008. (ISBN: 978-0-470-09758-8)

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When we were invited to review manga versions of four of Shakespeare’s plays—Hamlet, Julius Caesar, Macbeth, and Romeo and Juliet—we were, frankly, a bit skeptical. The term manga, after all, means “whimsical pictures,” and we thought we’d see yet another watered-down version of the Bard’s work. Our skepticism grew when we discovered that the publisher is Wiley, the folks who churn out Cliffs Notes. Julia, a scholar of Renaissance literature and Shakespeare specialist, wondered about whether manga could capture the wit, complexity, and insight of the original texts; Jonathan, a compositionist and rhetorician,

worried about the potential loss of certain kinds of reading and literacy skills as more and more “text” moves to multimedia and visually-laden formats. Would we see more “whimsy” than wonder in the pictures? Would Shakespeare be, yet again, dumbed down?

Our fears, though, proved premature. This new line of Shakespeare’s plays may be designed for high school and young adult students, and they may be intended, as the publisher says, to make “the play’s action and meaning more accessible and enjoyable than ever” (Wiley). But they are also much more than just teaching tools, and they are hardly “dumbed-down.” Rather, Adam Sexton, the writer who worked with several different manga artists to create these attractive editions, has masterfully created full-fledged adaptations of Shakespeare’s work—adaptations that succeed not just pedagogically but also as complex and even provocative interpretations of these classic works.

The books look like Japanese comics: in size, in layout, and in drawing techniques, but these Shakespeare manga versions would not be out of place in the manga section of any Borders or Barnes & Noble. The characters depicted, too, are young and attractive manga characters, designed, one feels, to appeal to a younger audience. Horatio in *Hamlet*, for instance, looks like Harry Potter in tights.

But upon closer inspection the books reveal great craft and care in the handling of their material. Sexton preserves the original language of Shakespeare’s plays, with characters delivering lines from the original dramas. And these are not simply abridged versions, either; in fact, the manga version of *Hamlet* contains all five soliloquies—unusual even in performed versions of the drama. When cuts have been made, they are often more directorial than synoptic. Sexton artfully interweaves scenes, imaginatively condensing, for example, the burial of Ophelia with a fictive funeral for Polonius. He gives extended attention to the soliloquies, dividing most of them over several spreads with both lyric explanations of the key imagery and clever dramatic

interventions (such as handing some of “To be or not to be” over to the Ghost).

Sexton, who teaches writing at the Parsons New School of Design, confesses that his interest in Shakespeare “was sparked by an encounter, in the second grade, with a friend’s Classics Illustrated comic of Julius Caesar (e-mail communication, June 2008). A glance into the dark backward and abysm of time is instructive. These mid-20th-century versions of Shakespeare’s plays are often heavy on narrative explanation, guiding the reader through the dramas. They are clearly teaching tools, designed to make sure readers don’t miss important points of plot, and their graphical layouts highlight this; the comics are laid out in a series of square panels, followed block by block, with narrative boxes leading from one sequence of events to another. Sexton’s versions, in contrast, eliminate the need for narrativizing by relying on manga’s propensity to have visuals—both text and graphics—burst out of frames in unique ways that contribute as much to the story as the dialogue. The words of Hamlet’s Ghost appear in white type on black fields, and when the young people swear upon Hamlet’s sword, the prop pierces through several frames, with the Ghost’s realm rendered as an inky field of woe. As such, the graphic representations serve to facilitate students’ reading, making the use of narrative tags unnecessary. By cutting narrative explanations and focusing on the words and actions of Shakespeare’s characters, the Manga series makes readers . . . well, read.

Clever graphics also serve as modes of interpretation. During the famous ghost scene in the first act of Hamlet, Horatio scuffles with his distraught friend, whom he tries to console and calm down. In the process, Horatio’s glasses (remember: he’s the one who looks like Harry Potter) fly off his face, hit the ground, and shatter into shards of glass—fragments that morph on the following page into the panels through which we see the action. This inventive visual choice shows readers graphically that they are dealing with a play in which interpretation—literally, how we see events—is a key thematic.

All in all, as English professors, we believe that a world without Cliffs Notes would be a better place. (At the very least, it would reduce our annual plagiarism queue by half!) We certainly prefer these redactions any day to a Cliffs Notes summary. But that sounds like faint praise for books that, if taught smartly, can open up a variety of conversations about Shakespeare, drama, staging, interpretation, and even media itself.

Indeed, how an instructor chooses to use these manga versions of Shakespeare's plays will say much about the instructor's interest in drawing out the complexity of interpretation inherent in each drama. We would recommend that the manga versions be read, of course, in conjunction with the original plays, and that they be treated for what they are—visual, even “staged” interpretations of the dramas. But they can also just as productively be “read” alongside film versions of the same plays as a provocative way to discuss staging and visual rhetoric. A rich cross-cultural and multi-media reading of *Macbeth*, for instance, might include a review of the original play, Sexton's manga version, and Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*, the classic film that uses samurai warriors to depict the Scottish tragedy. An examination of cultural sharing—how one culture appropriates another's stories and narrative styles—might powerfully augment a more traditional reading of the play. In fact, such an approach might highlight some of Shakespeare's own borrowings from ancient cultures to meet the needs of Renaissance audiences.

Perhaps one of the most productive dimensions of the manga versions might lie in their ability not only to excite interest in Shakespeare's dramas but also to stimulate consideration of various media and their different affordances. A manga version of *Hamlet*, as we have suggested, can make interpretive gestures that other media—the original text and even a filmed version—cannot. As such, a consideration of these manga versions in conjunction with other “readings” and renderings of Shakespeare's work may open up lively discussions of media and media literacy—discussions that our students increasingly need to have if we are to become more literate about and fluent with the media

venues and technologies that surround us. This approach may be the one most intriguing to compositionists and other literacy specialists looking for engaging ways to discuss media ecologies and the transformation of “text,” story, narrative, and information across media.

Wiley is not the first publisher to come up with a Manga Shakespeare. Self Made Hero, a dedicated manga house, came out with their versions of Hamlet and Romeo and Juliet in 2007. Whereas Wiley’s series sticks with Elizabethan settings, Self Made Hero goes in a hipper and more futuristic direction — Verona becomes Tokyo, and Elsinore is cyberspace. (See <http://mangashakespeare.ning.com/> for more information.) At the very least, such adaptations promise new interpretive directions that will undoubtedly have their pedagogical appeal and usefulness. The Folger Library took the Wiley mangas seriously enough to feature author Adam Sexton and artist Yali Lin at a public forum to discuss their work.

However one uses these books, they are sure to intrigue—perhaps even delight. They demonstrate to us something of a truism: in their faithfulness to the original texts, they show us that, indeed, the play is the thing. In their embracing of their medium’s affordances and potential, they show us what textual play might be.

#### Works Cited

*Shakespeare’s Hamlet*, The Manga Edition. Wiley Publishing. 2008.  
<<http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0470097574.html>>.