Kill Shakespeare – *This Bard contains graphic language!*

by Mauro Gentile

Today, the adaptation of Shakespeare plays into comic books or graphic novels appears to be a well-established literary practice in contemporary storytelling. As a matter of fact, *Kill Shakespeare* is inscribed within an ever-increasing circle of comics transpositions that can be considered almost a subgenre per se. This subgenre includes a wide range of Shakespearean adaptations, whose heterogeneity is determined by their intended readers, their graphic approaches, or their adherence to the source texts. On one hand, for instance, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1951), *Hamlet* (1952), and *Macbeth* (1955) were published in the Classic Illustrated series and were thought to be a way of drawing reluctant young readers to literature thanks to their visual appeal, whereas the re-interpretations of A *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1990) and *The Tempest* (1996) in Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* were addressed to an adult audience. On the other, in the 1980s, Oval Projects, Ltd. adapted three Shakespearean plays "in strictly visual terms" (Versaci 2007:193), producing *King Lear* (1984), a graphic novel in which Ian Pollock's illustrations stand out for their experimental stance while, in the 2000s, Self Made Hero published the Manga Shakespeare series, mixing Shakespeare and the Japanese comics style. Nevertheless, all these comic book adaptations are not just condensed versions of Shakespeare's plays as they explore new spaces of interpretation of Shakespeare's works. The word-image interplay is particularly appropriate to spotlight a new imagery dwelling on the margins of verbal language, revealing the flexible nature of comics language, usually imbued with intertextual elements and metanarrative connotations.

Within this scenario, *Kill Shakespeare* has a privileged position among the various Shakespearean comics adaptations. Actually, *Kill Shakespeare* is a graphic novel co-written by Canadian authors Anthony Del Col and Conor McCreery, with the illustrations by Andy Belangerand released by IDW Publishing. Four story arcs have been produced so far: *A Sea of Troubles* published in 2010, *The Blast of War* in 2011, *The Tide of Blood* released in 2013 and *The Mask of Night* in 2014. The plot seems to honour the promise of an "Epic adventure of Shakespearean proportions" (expressed in the trailer that was produced for the initial promotional campaign): basically, after being banished from Denmark for the murder of Polonius, Hamlet discovers he is the Shadow King of a prophecy claiming his pivotal role in finding a mysterious and divine wizard called William Shakespeare. On the one hand, Shakespeare is seen as a saviour and is sought for help by the Prodigals, a group of rebels, led by Juliet Capulet, trying to depose Richard III. On the other, the king, helped by Lady Macbeth, wants to find Shakespeare and kill him to create a new order in his world. As the authors say:

> It's an action-adventure story where we take all of Shakespeare's greatest heroes and most menacing villains and put them all together, same world, same story, same adventure. It's all about a quest to track down and kill or save a mysterious wizard by the name of William Shakespeare, so it's kind of Lord of the *Rings* and *Game of Thrones* meet *Shakespeare in Love*. (Aubé 2012)

So, whereas the characters are familiar, their quest is completely new, and their challenge transforms even those we think we know well. McCreer and Del Col, with their perspective on Shakespearean lore, underline the pervasive quality of the Bard in contemporary culture, acknowledging his plays as a fertile source of inspiration:

> Scratch almost any story and a Shakespearean theme emerges. He's everywhere. […] But most people aren't aware of this. Plus, he created a model of entertainment that appeals to all audiences, including elements of straight escapism and thought-provoking drama. (Thill 2010)

Moreover, in different interviews, both authors attempt to expand the frame of reference beyond the plays of Shakespeare, alluding to heterogeneous sources of inspiration such as Tolkien and the *Lord of the Rings*, Spider-Man, the X-Men, Joe Sacco, Micheal Chabon, *Star Wars*, Tom Stoppard, Baz Luhrmann, and Kenneth Branagh. Therefore, *Kill Shakespeare* is shaped both into a palimpsest in which Shakespearean tradition is continuously rewritten and into a site of either encounter or struggle between the Shakespearean canon and popular culture. McCreery and Del Col problematize this relationship through a series of intertextual practices (that are appropriation, parody, pastiche) informing *Kill Shakespeare* narration and prompting readers to be responsive to the continuous oscillation between expectation and surprise.

Kill Shakespeare has achieved critical acclaim, with many reviewers praising the novelty of collecting, writing, and drawing several Shakespearean characters into a new imaginary landscape in which they can develop new narrations, both different

from and consistent with what Shakespeare originally wrote. For instance, in *The NewYork Times*, Gustines writes that "the story […] is gripping, violent and dark fun, even if you're not fully versed in Shakespearean lore." (Gustines 2010) However, some critics were less fascinated by McCreery and Del Col's endeavor, as the words of Shakespeare scholar Kimberly Cox, partner of well-known comic creator Frank Miller, suggest in an interview with Rich Johnston:

> And now a BAD comic book? I am shaking my head. I want to cry. I want to bitch slap whoever was involved with creating it. However, this kind of crap is nothing new. […T]he comic book is seriously so poorly done, so flawed on even the most elementary levels of story-telling, I cannot imagine it doing anything but alienating even more people. Come on, the villain tells the hero his task is to steal Shakespeare's Quill? I just threw up in my mouth. (Johnston 2010)

Undeniably, Shakespeare is a subject of great passions. However, this does not explain Cox's reaction, elicited by the lack of Shakespearean meter par excellence, that is the iambic pentameter, throughout this comic book. In fact, this kind of critical stance, or outburst, might become an exercise in conceited erudition because it reduces the complexities, in this case, of *Kill Shakespeare* into one single formal element. Taking into consideration a wider array of issues related to this comic book can provide more interesting critical outcomes.

On a linguistic level, the writing is a believable mix giving an idea of what Shakespearean colloquial speech could be. Actually, the authors decide to blend a great deal of quotations from Shakespearean plays, mostly recontextualized, and archaisms, sometimes used incorrectly, to create a language that sounds Shakespearian and conveys a sense of distance in space and time, reinforcing the Tolkenian atmosphere of *Kill Shakespeare*.

On a graphic level, illustrations contribute considerably to the success of the series enhancing a strong and powerful representation of settings and characters. The colours are extremely vivid: the use especially of red, black, dark blue and grey elicits a grim and mysterious atmosphere which perfectly fits the continuous tensions surrounding the narrative development. The authors, moreover, plunge into a complete set of horrific images displayed in a thoroughly graphic manner: there is a plethora of chopped off heads or hands, wounds of all kinds all over the body, scars, blood, eye-gouging, cannibalism, and so on. This graphic violence, especially connected to villains such as Richard III or Iago, does not seem a gratuitous display of dreadful images, rather an attempt to evoke a bleak and eerie atmosphere and a sense of terror and danger in the narration. (Botting 1996: 1-2)

Nonetheless, these bodily images, used as a tool to convey the harshness of the *Kill Shakespeare* world, are balanced by the accurate physical stylization of the characters, a very important aspect in comic books because it is the first way readers can relate to them. Among the many characters of *Kill Shakespeare*, Hamlet, Juliet, Romeo, Richard III, Othello, Iago, Feste, Don John, Puck, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Prospero, Miranda, Sycorax and so on, two characters stand out for their

representation: on one hand Lady Macbeth, on the other Shakespeare himself. In *Kill Shakespeare* Lady Macbeth is a queen, a powerful witch associated to the Weird Sisters, and a former disciple of Prospero. Her character is built upon her purpose to kill Shakespeare and on her hidden agenda, that is to fight the rules of a patriarchal society which would like to relegate her to the mere companion of a man as opposed to an individual in search for power, revenge, and answers:

> LADY MACBETH I have no wish to stand meekly by your side […] we cannot all be masters, Richard. Nor can all masters be truly followed. We be equals or we be enemies. (McCreery, Del Col 2015: 139)

Described as a "sex bomb" by Belanger (2015), Lady Macbeth's appearance calls into question the modes of representation of women in comics. As a matter of fact, in order to seduce male readers with sexy images, comics authors have often depicted women, especially in superhero comics, with short skirts or in extremely tight outfits, or emphasising their conventional female sexuality by giving them slim figures and exaggerated breasts. Even though this is not entirely true of *Kill Shakespeare*, the body of Lady Macbeth comes close to being fetishized whereas the authors balance this impression by depicting her as assertive and independent, and capable of employing an emasculating strategy to manipulate men and their power.

> LADY MACBETH Thou simply had to learn thy place. Thou art a tool, a weapon to be turned upon my enemies. But thou thought thyself to be something greater. And so I must punish thee. Who is the first amongst us now Richard? (McCreery, Del Col 2015: 287)

Not all the characters, though, are in search of more power. One of the most interesting aspects of *Kill Shakespeare* is, as a matter of fact, the presence and the development of William Shakespeare as a character. Shakespeare here is depicted as a wizard, a god-like figure whose fate is connected to the lives of the other characters that are conscious of being his creations. Yet, Shakespeare is a Frankenstein-like creator, full of flaws and estranged from his creatures. What is more, Shakespeare is represented, at first, as a cynical drunkard who is aware of the problems afflicting his creatures (the characters of his plays) but, nonetheless, has decided to live his life in a secluded, magic forest, called The Globe, drowning his spleen in alcohol. When Hamlet, fulfilling the prophecy, manages to reach him, Shakespeare slowly realizes that his power entails responsibilities towards his creatures, underlining the element of choice:

> SHAKESPEARE My children. I stand before thee humbled, ashamed, lost […] I desired to be a wise father, a caring father. So I constructed this world to be a paradise for all of you to live in. And then I gave you the greatest gift – choice. But not all choices made are good ones. And so I opened the door to villainy, avarice, greed, jealousy, hatred, murder. As much as I tried, I could not alter

these choices. They were beyond me, as I thought all important things to be. (McCreery, Del Col 2015: 257-259)

The complex and conflictual relationships between character and playwright, creation and creator drive the narration towards not only a clash of philosophical viewpoints but also into an actual battleground in which those who consider Shakespeare as a savior (Juliet, Othello, Hamlet, and Falstaff) fight against those who blame him for turning them into slaves (Richard III and Lady Macbeth). *Kill Shakespeare*, then, may be considered a battleground where tradition and innovation fight, while McCreer, Del Col and Beling reassume the divine role of creators. As Bryan J. L. Glass (2015: VI) has written in the preface to the Backstage Edition of *Kill Shakespeare*:

> Tolkien would have called them sub-creators, as they've breathed life into their world via the greatest collection of pre-existing personalities to ever be unleashed upon Western Civilization – that extraordinary cast first employed by the entity […] known as William Shakespeare. Even the Great Bard himself – god of his own creation – was conscripted by this Earthly Trinity to serve as the deity of their world. That world wrestles then from beginning to end with the great philosophical and theological question: can the Creator be held to account by his own creation, to be found guilty of its failures […] or perhaps to reveal how such human flaws as you and I could be the very secret of its perfection?

Apart from embodying the presence of Del Col and McCreer metaphorically in the story, at an iconic level, the representation of William, once again, epitomizes both the balance between tradition and modernization and it confirms comic book adaptations as an interpretive tool that can illuminate new aspects of Shakespeare canon-based imagery. For example, on his first appearance, Shakespeare looks like a haggard man maintaining his dramatic demeanour and his earring as in the Chandos portrait. The image of Shakespeare changes little throughout the narration, even though he disguises himself as a jester: after killing Richard III, thus ending the war between the Prodigals and the king's army, Shakespeare starts playing the fool in order to disappear and blend with his people. In this way, he exchanges his role of God for the role of a jester. Predictably, the person who unmasks Shakespeare is another fool, Feste:

FESTE	Though I believe thou art no common jester […]
SHAKESPEARE	No, no… I am but a simple fool playing under the name Free Will.
FESTE	Fool? A fool is an interesting role, is it not, Will? Most people believe we – fools – simply uncover jokes and discover laughs. But what they do not realize is that fools – the great fools – are in fact the wisest in the room. It is our role to share that wisdom. (McCreery, Del Col 2013: 52)

In fact, we discover that Shakespeare has tried to share his wisdom with one of his former disciples turned foe, namely Prospero. When the wizard of the *Tempest* compels Shakespeare to go to his island, his aim is to replace the Bard as creator of a new world in order to bring back his wife to life. When Shakespeare confers his powers on Prospero, the result is unexpected:

> PROSPERO   And now all that was yours is mine. What…?
> SHAKESPEARE   Welcome to the forms of the things unknown. Welcome to the airy nothing. Welcome to the edge of what is, Prospero. […] If thou doth pull down this world, all that shall remain is this ceaseless, hungry void. This blank page brings no peace until thou fill its ravenous maw. It will devour thy every inspiration, chew upon thy every insight. Welcome to the forms of things unknown. (McCreery, Del Col 2013: 113)

The illustrator is particularly capable of displaying a space which is and contains imagination, precisely showing us a blank space, the white page on which writers and illustrators alike experiment their talent. Yet, Prospero is appalled by the sight of this whiteness while trying to be a god-like figure recreating his wife:

> PROSPERO   Her form, yes, barely. But to remake her? Every facet? Every detail? It is impossible. (McCreery, Del Col 2013: 115)

When he realizes his powerlessness – understanding that as a flawed creature, son of a flawed god, he can create only a mere shadow of life – Prospero commits suicide, expressing his free will and right to choose.

Currently, thanks to the flexibility of comics language and the complexities that can be incorporated into their narrations, adaptations, and appropriations of Shakespeare into comic books and graphic novels are being published seamlessly, some with modernized texts, some Manga-style, some with a penchant for science fiction, some with a bit of everything. Nonetheless, they can all be considered a powerful device to invite readers, especially young readers, who supposedly are the main target of comic books, into the world of Shakespeare. And this is true for *Kill Shakespeare* because, with its mixture of Elizabethan flavour and *Game of Thrones* style, it uses the plays of the Bard as a starting point to create new stories and narrations much as Shakespeare did. The work also introduces a new character, William Shakespeare himself, facilitating reflections on the relationship between creator and creations.

For further explorations of this graphic novel phenomenon, it could be intriguing to analyze and investigate the interconnections and echoes resonating throughout this new Shakespearean corpus, a fresh and full-fledged narrative universe full of balloons and colours, signifying a new life for Shakespeare.

WORKS CITED

Aubé B., *All the World's a Stage for Timmins Native*, 23 December 2012, <http://www.timminspress.com/2012/12/23/all-the-worlds-a-stage-for-timmins-nati ve> (6 September 2016).

Botting F., 1996,*Gothic*, Routledge, London and New York.

Glass B. J. L., "In the Beginning… an Empty Page", *Kill Shakespeare Backstage Edition*, IDW Publishing, San Diego, p. VI.

Gustines G. G., *Graphic Books*, 12 November 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/ 2010/11/26/books/26graphicbooks.html?_r=0> (8 September 2016).

H. Sherman, *American Theatre: "Drawing on Shakespeare"*, 1 November 2012, <http://www.hesherman.com/otherwriting/2012/11/01/american-theatre-drawing-on -shakespeare/> (8 September 2016).

Kittredge K., 2014, "Lethal Girls Drawn for Boys: Girl Assassins in Manga/Anime and Comics/ Film", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 39(4), Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, pp. 506-532.

McCreery C., A. Del Col and A. Belanger, 2013, *Kill Shakespeare – The Tide of Blood*, IDW Publishing, San Diego.

McCreery C., A. Del Col and A. Belanger, 2013, *Kill Shakespeare – The Mask of Night*, IDW Publishing, San Diego.

McCreery C., A. Del Col and A. Belanger, 2015 [2010-2011], *Kill Shakespeare – Backstage Edition*, IDW Publishing, San Diego.

R. Johnston, *Shakespearean Scholar (And Frank Miller's Girlfriend) Blasts KILL SHAKESPEARE*, 4 April 2010, <https://www.bleedingcool.com/2010/04/12/shakepearan -scholar-and-frank-millers-girlfriend-blasts-kill-shakespeare/> (6 September 2016).

S. Thill, *Kill Shakespeare Comic Puts the Bard in a Blender*, 4 February 2010, <https://www.wired.com/2010/04/kill-shakespeare/> (25 August 2016).

S. Thill, *Kill Shakespeare's Final Showdown Is Just the Start*, 17 August 2011, <https://www.wired.com/2011/08/exclusive-kill-shakespeare/> (2 September 2016).

Versaci R., 2007, *This Book Contains Graphic Language – Comic as Literature*, Continuum, New York and London.

<https://www.comicbookmovie.com/comics/exclusive-interview-with-kill-shake speare-creators-anthony-del-col-conor-mccreery-a58772> (6 September 2016).

Mauro Gentile has a Ph.D. in English Literature with a thesis on Neil Gaiman. His areas of research interest include also mainstream comics and critical issues connected to postmodern literature. He has collaborated with the chair of Contemporary English Literature at the Università degli Studi di Milano. He also works as a theatre director.

mau.gentile@gmail.com