

Countess Olivia of Illyria, in mourning for her father

"We will draw the curtain and show you the picture..."



The war of the worlds?

Classics, comics and ways of thinking about adaptations

by Mel Gibson

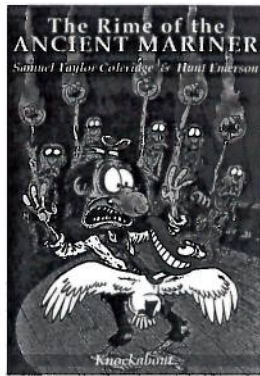
"If music be the food of love, play on!"

Duke Orsino of Illyria, in love with Olivia

Recently, a gentleman who had attended a talk I had given asked a familiar question about comics. He wondered if I had heard of the adaptations of classic fiction that he had read and enjoyed in his youth. He argued that they had opened him up to the possibility of reading classics, which, he said, he would never have willingly done otherwise, and that it had led to a lifetime of enthusiastic reading across genres and canons. The same gentleman said that whilst these comics were seen by teachers in his era as 'cheating', by which he meant enabling students to avoid reading the full text of books that were part of the curriculum, he thought that they could offer a good plot summary and get key ideas across well. His hope was that they were still available, although he feared they would be rather dated. Many readers will already have recognised that the texts under discussion are the Classics Illustrated series, which began in the 1940s <http://www.classicsillustrated.co.uk/>.

What I'm going to outline here are a number of the different approaches taken by various creators and publishers who have created comic or manga versions of a range of texts. In doing so I hope to show that whilst the memory of the Classics Illustrated series, ably summed up by the gentleman above, is dominant, there are actually a range of ways of thinking about, creating and working with such texts. I'm also going to make a few suggestions about ways of using these texts in schools. ▶

'...these comics were seen by teachers in his era as 'cheating'...'



The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Hunt Emerson



The Tempest, Graphic Shakespeare 2009

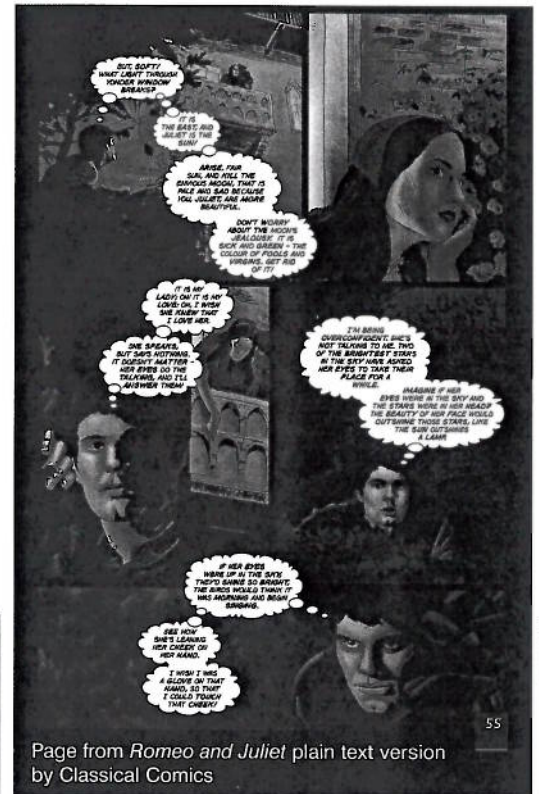
The tensions expressed in our discussion about the function and potential of the comic book adaptation continue to be significant, especially given the recent emergence of two contemporary publishers, selfmadehero <http://www.selfmadehero.com/> and Classical Comics <http://www.classicalcomics.com/>, who are working with classic texts and texts used in the curriculum. Both publishers have attracted media attention in ways which tie in with the discussion above, where arguments about 'dumbing down' and ones that the child reader will never move on to 'proper' books (meaning text-only in the context of such critique), are balanced by arguments for accessibility and creating enthusiastic readers who, empowered by their understanding of the core narrative, will read the full text. Classics Illustrated, even when simplifying narrative and language, certainly encouraged reading for pleasure in earlier generations, along with many other titles, in either medium, as some of my work on memories of comics suggests <http://www.dr-mel-comics.co.uk/publications/comics.html>: and I feel strongly that the texts emerging now will do the same.

'...arguments about "dumbing down"...

What is interesting here are the underlying assumptions in both positive and negative articles. One is that comics are solely for children, and that these are simplified texts. In both cases this may, or may not, be part of the aim of the publishers. For some, their approach is about creating what Art Spiegelman (in Auster, Karasik and Mazzucchelli, 2004) described as 'visual translations' which are themselves demanding reads for adults. Checking the website of the publishers and creators involved to get a sense of their intention, of how they envisage specific titles being used, will help you find adaptations suitable for your purpose, whatever it might be.

Another key assumption is that the comics are not full text versions. Yet, whilst the majority are adaptations, there are examples of comics which do present the full text. The Classical Comics versions of Shakespeare's plays that have been created so far each exist in three forms, one of which is the complete original text. Of the other two versions one is described as plain text (a 'translation' into modern English with around the same word count) and the other as quick text, which simplifies the dialogue but keeps the essence of the narrative. Here you can see the potential for using all three versions, which use the same art work, to compare the different ways the language is used in each. They also offer, via their website, downloads of both study plans and a fourth version of elements of the plays, where the artwork is available with empty speech balloons, plus further suggestions for using the books.

The ethos here is that these are texts which should be seen, as well as read, and that they can support students getting to grips with the complexities of the language used, as is the case with selfmadehero's Manga Shakespeare series. These are adaptations, but use the original language, the images, again, serving to support and develop understanding. Their website offers additional materials, including animations and they run both artist and actor workshops in schools, which serves to emphasise the potential for cross-curricular work.



Page from Romeo and Juliet plain text version by Classical Comics

Two additional points. Firstly, both series are proving popular as reading for pleasure, issuing from public libraries as well as finding a home in school libraries, particularly given the enthusiasm for manga amongst younger readers. Secondly, there is another way of working with these texts which emphasises thinking about the images. When a director works with one of these plays for theatre or film, their visual interpretation expressed in set, costume etc. is inevitably significant. Seeing several versions of the same play is not always possible, but looking at several different comic artists work in relation to the same text offers a good way of making points about the way that interpretations can vary. It also establishes that there is not one dominant vision or version, thus escaping what was described to me by a teacher as the 'is that the bit that happens at the swimming pool, miss?' tendency when one version of a play comes to be seen as 'the play'. There is, in addition, a third series of graphic Shakespeare, which can further enhance these possibilities, those published by Can of Worms Press <http://www.canofwormspress.co.uk/comicshakespeare1.html>.

'...there are examples of comics which do present the full text.'

It is not only plays that have become comics. Creating illustrations for a poem, or a comic strip version, is a cross-curricular activity that many schools have tried. What is useful here is for staff and students to see some versions created by comic artists. I'd always recommend using Hunt Emerson's full text version of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as stimulus for such work (as well as using it to study the poem). It explores the relationship between text and image in two ways, one offering support in understanding, the other offering a series of visual jokes that run alongside the thrust of the main text. It is an energetic and powerful interpretation. Gareth Hind's edited version of *Beowulf* is another possibility <http://www.beowulftranslations.net/comics.shtml> Short stories can also benefit from a similar approach using, for instance, the Eye Classics collection of Edgar Allen Poe's short stories *Nevermore* or the Welsh language *Y Mabinogi* by Mike Collins.

Involving students in creating their own graphic adaptation of a text may involve working with pen and paper or using software. It is also possible to create photo-stories. I came across a notable example developed by a teacher in Wales, where the focus was on photographs that had been taken by students, using mobiles and cameras, of a performance of a play (with full permission, of course). The students made decisions about which images to use to convey the story effectively, so learning about editing. Working with the images, script, memories of the performance and Comic Life software <http://plasq.com/>, they created their own version of the narrative which could be used in school, and by the drama group.

As I mentioned, adaptations which are edited novels, but use the language of the original text, are the most common variant in this field within comic publishing. Both selfmadehero and Classical Comics do this. Whilst some are linked to the curriculum, others are not, and the audiences for the latter are as likely to be adults as younger readers. The firms offer different foci, in that selfmadehero's Eye Classics are European and world literature, including Franz Kafka's 'The Trial' http://www.selfmadehero.com/classical_eye/index.html They publish also Sherlock Holmes graphic novels <http://www.selfmadehero.com/sherlockholmes/>. Classical Comics, in contrast, focuses more on British classic novels producing them in original and quick text versions and having more of a curriculum focus <http://www.classicalcomics.com/books/frankenstein.html>. With these texts, one of the main possibilities is encouraging students to look at comic and original versions, simply comparing and contrasting. I recently attended an academic conference where one paper which did this, albeit at a different level, analysing the relationships between Paul Auster's *City of Glass* and Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli's complex and complementary 'visual translation' (*City of Glass*. Faber and Faber, 2004).

Again, these are not the only publishers or texts in this area. For instance, the David Wenzel version of J.R.R Tolkein's *The Hobbit* has been in libraries since 1990. What this adaptation exemplifies is that these may be texts which do encourage emergent readers into taking on texts beyond their immediate capabilities. It is also a very 'text heavy' adaptation, being around six thousand words long. Whilst it can still be appreciated in its own right, this type of adaptation is more likely to be seen as a confidence builder. This is also the case with Antony Johnson's adaptations of the 'Alex Rider' novels, of the comic adaptations of Terry Pratchett's work, of the 'Goosebumps Graphix' series and of Eoin Colfer and Andrew Donkin's adaptation of 'Artemis Fowl', amongst many others.

'...using comics can build confidence...'

However, this is not the limit of the adaptation. P Craig Russell, for instance, has developed several graphic novels based on operas <http://www.nbmpub.com/fairytales/russell/russell2.html> and Eric Shanower is responsible for a series about the Trojan War, 'Age of Bronze' <http://age-of-bronze.com/aob/index.shtml>. There are also several graphic bibles, including a manga one http://www.theheartofsiku.com/THE%20MANGA%20BIBLE%20HOME/THE_MANGA_BIBLE_HOME.htm

In conclusion, using comics can build confidence for emergent readers, help students understand complex language, give an introduction to a classic text, or present a complete version of it. They can be used to show that different adaptations reflect an individual's understanding and interpretation of a text. They can also illuminate texts like poems and plays, as well as novels. Further, they may help with subject knowledge, or increase engagement and enthusiasm in all sorts of ways, depending on the specific text. The graphic adaptation is more complex than memories of Classics Illustrated suggest, although their original intention, to stimulate a love of reading, especially of challenging literature, remains at the core of much is what is produced today. ■

Mel Gibson

Further Information and Resources: Dr Mel Comics <http://www.dr-mel-comics.co.uk/> Mel has worked as a school and public librarian, but is now working in universities, as well as offering training on visual literacies across various professional sectors in Britain and further afield. Her doctoral thesis was about reading, memory and comics and she has published internationally on comics, manga, graphic novels, picture books and children's fiction. Her website offers a range of resources for anyone interested in comics, graphic novels and manga.



Beowulf, Gareth Hind

