

Anna Wołosz-Sosnowska

From Page to Panel – Comic Book Adaptations and Appropriations of William Shakespeare’s Plays

Abstract

The dissertation analyses 15 adaptations of Shakespeare plays in comics which were published in the 21st century. They were created in the Anglo-American or Franco-Belgian (European) style and are examples of auteur comics, i.e. not belonging to a series. The thesis oscillates between and combines three areas: Shakespeare studies, comics studies and adaptation studies. The aim is to analyse the comics and attempt to answer the question of the manner in which meaning in Shakespeare comics is created. The dissertation comprises five chapters, three of which establish theoretical aspects and definitions, which are adopted in the analytical part.

Chapter 1 titled “Defining Comics: An Analytical and Historical Approach” provides an introduction to the definitions that are used throughout the dissertation. The issue of definition in comics studies is a complex one, hence it was significant to present a clear understanding of the term ‘comics’, which appeared to be too broad for the analytical purpose of this work; for this reason, the terms Shakespeare comics, Shakespeare comics adaptations and Shakespeare comics appropriations were introduced. The second part of the chapter centres around the notion of the hybridity of comics, and shifts the perspective from comics as verbal-visual hybrid to comics as a hybrid of various media.

The second chapter “Shakespearean Adaptations in Comics: A Theoretical and Historical Overview” is historical and theoretical in nature. It commences with an overview of the research concerning the study of Shakespeare comics, in order to identify the gaps and position the thesis within a greater scope of research. The second part of the chapter discusses theories of adaptation, the differentiation between adaptation and appropriation, and the notions of adaptation as a process and a product, modes of engagement, fluid text, fidelity. The chapter is concluded with an overview of the history of Shakespeare comics and their sources. The subchapter also divides the Shakespeare comics into two broad groups, series and auteur comics.

Chapter 3 titled “Verbal and Visual Elements of Comics” is a theoretical chapter dissecting the notion of visual language or comics, and the semiotic elements the visual language of comics possess. The theory adopts the division into macro-semiotic elements, which encompass page layout and composition, and micro-semiotic elements which include panel and narrative frame, gutter, panel transition, speech balloon and caption. Other visual elements are colour and the depiction of sound, music and silence in comics. The second part focuses on the verbal language of comics, and the way comics include language; this subchapter refers to Shakespearean language and its position within comics. All of the elements and definitions are adopted in the analysis of the selected titles.

The remaining two chapters are purely analytical. Chapter 4 “A Semiotic Analysis of Shakespeare Comics Adaptations” scrutinises 9 instances of Shakespeare comics adaptations: *The Merchant of Venice* (2008), *King Lear* (2009), *Romeo and Juliet* (2013), *Macbeth* (2015) by Gareth Hinds; *The Tempest Illustrated* (2009) by John Allison; *Hamlet* (2010) by Nicky Greenberg; *Romeo and Juliet: The War* (2011) by Stan Lee, Terry Dougas, Mark Work and Skan Srisuwan; *The Tragedie of Macbeth* (2016) by Kenneth Steward Moore; *Macbeth* (2019) by Petri Hänninen and Petri Hiltunen. For a clearer comprehension of the discussed examples, each author and each titles is presented in a short description. The analysis follows the pattern (from macro-semiotics to micro-semiotics) as adopted in Chapter 3.

Chapter 5 “A Semiotic Analysis of Shakespeare Comics Appropriations” follows the same structure and pattern which was adopted in Chapter 4. It analyses 6 instances of Shakespeare comics appropriations: *Prince of Cats* (2016) by Ron Wimberly; *Shakespeare Ohne Worte* (2016) by Frank Flöthmann, which includes fives short stories: *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tempest* and *Othello*; *Findlay Macbeth* (2020), *The Prince of Denmark Street* (2022), *The Midsummer Night’s Dream Team* (2023a), *Richard the Third* (2023b) by Kev F. Sutherland. Each author is provided with a biographical note and the comics are given a summary of the setting and character changes. The analysis follows the pattern from macro-semiotics to micro-semiotics, with each of the elements discussed separately, as well as comparing and contrasting them with Shakespeare comics adaptation where possible.

The dissertation finishes with conclusions of the findings and possible adoption of the theoretical framework in the future and the impact the thesis might have on Shakespeare studies, comics studies, and adaptation studies. The analysis of the selected adaptations and appropriations allows to reach a general conclusion of the complexity of Shakespeare comics, their history, themes, aesthetics. However, comics creators adopt only a limited number of

semiotics elements, they neither experiment with the formal semiotic elements, nor introduce new ones to meet their artistic purpose. Shakespeare comics, in majority of cases, adopt the same semiotic elements as other comics. However, as the medium matures the authors are more open to experiment with the form. A surprising conclusion is sustaining the link with the source text in every example, the link can be a single line from the text or the title, but the authors preserve the link. This is particularly surprising in case of appropriations which are known for altering the plot, the characters and the language.

The thesis also includes Appendix 1 which lists all the instances of Shakespeare comics, Shakespeare comics adaptations and Shakespeare appropriations that the author was able to find and trace. Each title is provided with bibliographical data. Appendix 1 is to facilitate the reader with the topic, indicating the diversity and plethora of Shakespeare comics.