

Now, Shakespeare gets comic treatment

UK Publishers To Turn Bard's Plays Into Comics; Critics Say 'Dumbing Down' Could Hurt Students

London: How would you want your child to be introduced to Shakespeare? (*Note to Puritans: Please don't read any further as it may be injurious to your health.*) Through his sonnets, plays and poems, or as some British publishers are planning, through comic strips.

One British publisher, Classical Comics, is planning to rework the Bard's plays as comic books for students who find him either too difficult or boring, while another is looking to offer him as *Manga Shakespeare*—cut-down versions of some of the plays, in a Japanese cartoon style.

Classical Comics hopes the comics will inspire disaffected readers with a love of the Bard's plays. The firm is working on full-colour comic versions of some of the plays, starting with *Henry V* and *Macbeth*, but taking a different approach to accessibility. Each comes in three versions to help teachers cater to children of differing literacy abilities: original text, "plain text" and "quick text". The first uses Shakespeare's own words, the sec-

MACBETH: THE ORIGINAL VERSUS THE 'QUICK TEXT'

Act two, scene one: Macbeth sees a blood-covered dagger

- **Original text:** Macbeth: "Is this a dagger, which I see before me, The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee."
- **Quick text:** Macbeth: "Is this a dagger in front of me? Come here!"
- **Original text:** Macbeth: "Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives."
- **Quick text:** Macbeth: "Enough talk."



ond translates them into plain English while the third—"quick text" version—uses as few words as possible.

The firm hopes to print 10,000 copies of each version of its first comic play, *Henry V*. *Macbeth* should be ready next year

and there are also plans for *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as classic novels including *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations*. The firm hopes eventually to publish comic strip versions of all Shakespeare's plays.

The comics are targeted at older pri-

mary students and teenagers and have already won the backing of the National Association for the Teaching of English.

But the Queen's English Society warned that "dumbed down" versions could backfire by allowing pupils to avoid tackling the language and themes of the originals. There is also a fear that this trend of simplifying literature could lead to more howlers and colloquialisms in students' exam papers.

Examiners have complained students discuss Shakespeare's plays as if they were TV soap operas and pepper their essays with conversational clichés and references to popular culture.

Another UK publishing house, Self Made Hero, is offering *Manga Shakespeare*—cut-down versions of some of the plays, in a Japanese cartoon style. They are drawn by established manga artists, the characters acquiring the typical big bright eyes and cute little noses of the form. Its first productions are *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*, with *Richard III* and *The Tempest* coming this autumn and oth-

ers to follow.

Romeo and Juliet, the blurb explains, is set in modern-day Japan. The text is Shakespeare's, but abridged. Meanwhile, the Prince of Denmark now inhabits the 'cyberworld' of 2017, when global climate change has devastated the planet.

Self Made Hero's Emma Hayley said Shakespeare's language had been cut where the comic format could carry the story visually. In addition, each work had had to be made to fit their standard 208-page paperback book format.

Guidance from Learning and Teaching Scotland says comics have often been dismissed as a medium in Britain, and are usually approached with caution by both libraries and schools as "somehow undermining literacy and morality". But it says graphic novels can play an important part in encouraging reading amongst older students, especially young men and boys who make up most of the market—though this is changing with the increasingly popularity of manga.

You make the call. AGENCIES