

Charleston Gazette (West Virginia)

Manga offers new take on Shakespeare By Laura Gould

July 21, 2007, Saturday

Charleston Catholic High School

Shakespeare's tragic "Romeo and Juliet" is probably the most well-known piece of literature ever written, as well as the world's greatest love story. There have been numerous versions of this story over the centuries, and it has been translated into many different languages. However, the general concept remains the same: Two people from warring families fall in love despite their backgrounds.

Unsurprisingly, I've found that numerous Disney movies have been based on this simple yet intriguing plotline: "Pocahontas," "Lion King 2" and "Lady and the Tramp 2" are just a few examples. There have also been versions of this story aimed at teenagers, such as "West Side Story" and the new "Manga Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet."

Sonia Leong, illustrator of "Manga Shakespeare," has captured Shakespeare's creative genius with the illustrations in her interpretation of one of his most renowned works. Like some others who have adapted Shakespeare's works, Leong chose to use the Bard's original words.

However, her version of this classic tale takes place in the more modern - if not mildly futuristic - setting of Tokyo's suburbs instead of the streets of Verona, Italy. The two star-crossed lovers are from a pair of powerful rivaling yakuza (Japanese Mafia) families. Romeo is portrayed as a popular rock star, while Juliet is a fashionable young girl from the Shibuya district.

As a whole, the majority of the characters and events are pretty much the exact same as in the original text, although Leong has incorporated some rather recent technology into the plotline, having many of the characters use objects such as mopeds, televisions and cell phones. She even makes the story a bit more comical through the use of chibi drawings (which portray characters in small, cute, childlike form) in the first few acts.

Leong's portrayal of this story is interesting because, unlike some of the other "modern" versions of the story that use guns or other such weapons, she chooses to incorporate sword fighting, thus keeping the story as close to the original as possible.

Through her imaginative drawings, Leong has breathed new life into an old but still fascinating story that has long entranced audiences across the globe (or Globe Theater for that matter). No one gets tired of the story of "Romeo and Juliet"



because everyone has lived at least a little piece of it, but by branching out into graphic novels, Leong has now reached a new audience through the wonderful and exciting world of manga.

Whether using "Manga Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet" as a guide for English class or just reading it for fun, you should take a look. It's a great manga, and I would recommend it and any other "Manga Shakespeare" graphic novels to read.

(Currently, "Hamlet" is the only other one offered in the United States, but "The Tempest" and "Richard III" are available abroad.)