

# 'A King of Infinite Space': Shakespearian Spaces between Stage and Comics

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## Shakespeare and Comics

As Gilbert Seldes noticed, «Of all the lively arts the comic strip is the most despised, and with the exception of the movies is the most popular» (Seldes: 1924, 213): such popularity was exploited by comics such as *Crazy Cat* to tackle social and moral issues. While there is little doubt as to the readers' appreciation, comics fought against a persistent skepticism (concerning their quality and their artistic value) which became particularly harsh when they dared to embrace and interpret revered artists and pillars of the Western canon like Shakespeare. Such inspiration in particular has been fueling the conflict between popular and high culture, whose core probably lies in interpreting the term 'popular' as a simplified rendition of an artistic work (Shaughnessy 2007). A 'popular' work reaches the highest and indiscriminate number of people, and the term 'popular culture' itself seems to imply mass consumption (Gillespie and Rhodes 2006: 1) and loss of quality.

It is worth remembering, however, that Shakespeare thrived by challenging with ease the two-tier, stiff classification between high and low contents (Henderson 2007: 15). Moreover, Shakespeare's cultural endurance is closely connected to the popular interest; hence, inter-semiotic translations of his plays are vital, and their analysis should be encouraged.

For instance, the trans-medial transfer of Shakespearean plays into comics leads to many stimulating reflections not only on the ways through which the source material is shaped and enriched by the target medium, but also on the possible alternative solutions to interpret and embrace the source medium itself.

A skilful exploitation of the visual specificity and peculiarity of the comic book page allows for groundbreaking renditions of Shakespeare's theatre. Moreover, the challenge of facing a canonical author stimulates the creation of visual solutions worthy of the source text, with a beneficial impulse on the aesthetic evolution of the target medium itself.

Trans-medial operations involving Shakespeare's plays are generally labeled 'offshoots', indicating the rough Shakespearean inspiration for the plot and the involvement of media other than theatre. Inside this broad category we first have appropriation, which entails «a [...] decisive journey away from the informing text into a wholly new cultural product» (Sanders: 2015, 35). The reader's curiosity is triggered by some background Shakespearean references while the main plot follows independent trajectories: a good example is "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*", by Neil Gaiman (DC Comics, 1990), whose premise of the third section draws upon Shakespeare's eponymous play, combining fantasy with mythology and drama<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Issue 19 of *The Sandman: Dream country* begins with Gaiman teasing the reader with a long shot of wagons travelling on the road: it is a troupe of weary actors, the youngest of whom, Hamnet, longs to find shelter and rest. The destination is known only to the man who seems to be in charge, whom an actor calls Will. Waiting for Will on the top of a hill is the dark and mysterious Dream: it is he who commissioned the mysterious man - the reader will have by now understood his identity - to write a play. Little does Shakespeare know that the play will be staged for its very characters: Titania, Auberon, Puck and many other fairy figures. As Dream recalls, 'we came to... an arrangement, four years back (in Sandman #13, "Men of Good Fortune,"): I'd give him what he thinks he most desires...and in return he's write [sic] two plays for me'. Shakespeare longed to possess the adequate skills to outshine his rival

A more recent appropriation is *Kill Shakespeare*: evident homage to Tarantino's *Kill Bill*, it is a twelve-issue comic book limited series released by IDW Publishing from 2010 to 2014. The characters of this awarded comic series are popular Shakespearean tragic characters, fighting in two (rather predictable) teams of villain and heroes who struggle to get the quill that will set them free from their creator's chains. *Kill Shakespeare* does not deeply engage with the features of Shakespeare's characters, nor does it require a deep knowledge of the plays to which they originally belonged to follow the plot: due to that, critical reviews of this comics perfectly exemplify the recalcitrance in dealing with popular adaptations of Shakespeare, especially when they do not commit to the source text<sup>2</sup>.

The second category of offshoots includes «adaptation, characterized by 'substantial cuts of scenes and speech assignments; much alteration of language; and at least one and usually several important additions» (Cohn 2015: 3) but also a general degree of faithfulness; these adaptations<sup>3</sup>, which embrace the plot and the

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Marlowe and 'spur the minds of men'. In exchange, he wrote two plays, the second of which appears in the final issue #75, "The Tempest". «The effect on the reader is as seamless and simultaneous as watching a live performance of the play itself» (Mortimore-Smith: 2012, 86).

<sup>2</sup> Shakespearean scholar Kimberly Cox used rather strong negative adjectives to criticize not only the lack of attempt to recreate the language, claiming that 'It's not so difficult once you study enough of the text', but also the overall idea of the comic, which has been defined 'insipid and anti-intellectual', 'an embarrassment for those who know Elizabethan and Jacobean drama' (<http://www.bleedingcool.com/2010/04/12/shakespearean-scholar-and-frank-millers-girlfriend-blasts-kill-shakespeare/>).

<sup>3</sup> The term 'comics' covers the language but also the medium and the subgenre of the comic book: Shakespeare's graphic adaptations are uniformly labeled as graphic novels. A neat critical distinction between graphic novel and comic book is still in progress. The first graphic novel appeared in 1978 with *A Contract with God* by Will Eisner, who employed the term coined by Richard Kyle around 1964 (Gravett 2005: 8) to define and distinguish his work from the

theatrical nature of the plays using them as a definite reference, are ideal to study how the many dimensions of the theatrical stage challenge and empower the spatial design of the comic panel. Attempts had been made to squeeze the stage inside a strip: Copi, playwright and comic writer who published in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *Linus* and *Evergreen*, recreated the theatrical atmosphere on his strips by combining the silence, the delays and the dilated time of the stage with an essentialist scenario (a lady sitting on a chair and a series of improbable interlocutors: kids, chickens, snails, elephants, ants and many more. Origa: 1977, 169). Adapting plays written for and solidly rooted in precise theatrical conventions from the past, however, is a far more complex task:

The challenge of the artist is constantly to balance the basic requirement of the medium [comics] to condense and clarify against the obligation to convey as fully as possible the play's complexity and depth by suggesting more than is shown or said. (Perret 2004: 74).

The source play (along with its theatrical nature) needs to be converted into a new narrative which does not betray the requirements of the target medium (Vanhaesebrouck 2004).

Medium specificity is the view that the media associated with a given art form (both its material components and the processes by

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previous comic-book production. Some critics state that the opposition is nonexistent, like «the difference between movies, films and cinema» (Wolk 2007: 61), or it is «a matter of labels», not having «anything to do with content or with any other feature» (Saraceni 2004: 4). Others distinguish between the two in terms of length (Rothschild 1995: xiv) or characters' evolution (Weiner 2005: vii). According to Romero-Jódar, both are defined as narrative iconical subgenres (2013: 122), graphic novels being a derivative evolution of the comic book. While they share the same iconic language, they differ in the use of narrative time, which in turn affects both the evolution of the characters and the time progression of the narration (132).

which they are exploited) (1) entail specific possibilities for and constraints on representation and expression, and (2) this provides a normative framework for what artists working in that art form ought to attend. (Pratt 2009: 97)

Hence, criticism of Shakespearean comic adaptations based on the differences between the source and the target text unmasks the implicit tendency to perceive the former as superior and to ignore the relevance of the target medium and its peculiarities in the inter-semiotic translation. Since every translation process is a mediation, the mediator's contribution (in this case, the comic writer or illustrator) cannot be passively limited to a mere reproduction of contents: «Comic book versions of Shakespeare's plays are not just illustrated digests of plots and sketches of character: inescapably, they interpret as well as inform» (Perret 2004: 73).

Spatial elements can then play a key role in Shakespearean adaptations: the following case studies demonstrate that the spatial distribution of panels on the comic book page and an original rendition of the space inside the panel are particularly suitable to reinterpret Shakespearean theatrical spaces as well as translating the key moments of the source plays in visually intriguing solutions.

## **Theatrical Spaces on the Elizabethan Stage**

Drama is a multi-medial narrative with a strong focus on action, which, in turn, needs to be supported and enhanced by words: for this reason, showing on stage proves more efficient than telling. Drama is also based on the here and now of the performance, where the visual element finds its core.

Theatrical space is the union of the dramatic space (intended as the fictional space), the stage space (occupied by the actors), and the gestural space (described by the actors' movements): the audience becomes in turn part of the space and of the performance as well. A powerful instrument to communicate via spatial references is proxemics: the

change in space (on stage) might then reveal clues on the development of the action without uttering a line.

As Styan underlines, «silence and space are the two aspects of Shakespeare's art which have been generally neglected» (Styan 1977: 20). The Elizabethan spatial network involved various kinds of spaces<sup>4</sup>, the most relevant of which were the stage space and the setting, the hardest to reproduce on comic adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. Being both real and virtual spaces of the theatre, they framed the actors and gave concrete evocativeness also to imaginary places. Moreover, the actors' position on the stage, the stage design, the scenery and the spatial indicators in the text were all elements which contributed to the message and to the performance: the foregrounding technique of making something or someone prominent in an immediate space proved that the position in the space was significant (West 2002).

The theatrical tendency to focus on action might lead to think that translating Shakespearean theatre into comics is quite an immediate operation: since action needs to be visualized, it appears particularly suitable to be visually represented in a panel. The Elizabethan theatre<sup>5</sup>, however, was evocative, not representative (Bernardi-Susa 2005: 172), and ignored the perspective which, for instance, characterized the Italian scenography. When the chorus of *Henry V* asks «Can this cockpit hold / The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram / Within this wooden O the

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<sup>4</sup> The classification of spaces in Shakespeare's and Elizabethan theatre includes the structural / topological space as the space whose crossing pushes the plot forward; the space in the single scene, which often is clarified or reinforced by deixis; linguistic/poetic space, as in the 'spacious' blank verse (which gives space to operate on psychology and to describe social interactions); social space, which produces and motivates social interactions, and space as indicator of power; finally, early modern geography, or the geographical space as it was known in Shakespeare's time (Habermann-Witen 2016: 4).

<sup>5</sup> The playhouse is commonly known as Elizabethan theatre, to indicate the period in which the theatrical exploit of Shakespeare and Burbage developed, but there was not a perfect chronological overlapping (Sinisi – Innamorati 2003: 99).

very casques / That did affright the air at Agincourt? (Act I, Prologue, vv. 12-15) the answer is certainly negative, so the audience's «imaginary forces» (v. 19) had to be supported by a «verbal scenography» (Baldini 2001: 113): while a limited number of objects helped establish the scene, the space of the action was evoked through words. Verbal descriptions were a consequence of the structure of the playhouse, which, far from being a mere frame, heavily contributed to the meaning of the play<sup>6</sup> itself: for instance, the presence of gallants (people who could afford to see the performance from the galleries or even from the stage) turned the nature of Shakespeare's asides from monologues to actual dialogues (*ibid.*: 115).

The Elizabethan stage did not try to portrait a precise room or space: «it was an unlocalized, neutral area, available to be split into two, three, or more parts» (Styan 1977: 24). The dramatic action took place in four different parts of the stage: the front stage (beyond the roof) and the back stage (behind the roof) were used for scenes set in the open, while the inner stage and the upper stage were reserved for scenes in indoor or elevated space, such as a bedroom or a balcony. The stage could support and even boost the meaning of a scene: the space – or the lack thereof – between the characters could improve the quality of a duologue, as the distance between the two young lovers justified the lyricism of the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. Furthermore, the placement on stage influenced the audience's predilection for one character or the other: the closer the character was to the audience, the warmer they would respond to him/her. Finally, a void around the actor, who then remains alone on the stage, further highlighted the sense of isolation of monologues.

Spectators were able to focus on the fight between Tybald and Benvolio but also on the crowd among them, fully understanding the

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<sup>6</sup> A change of space could also determine a change of audience and of plays to be performed, as it happened with the new indoor theatre built by the King's men in Blackfriars, which could allow for performances even in the winter season and for this reason attracted a new kind of audience (Baldini 2011: 111).

complexity of the scene, or they could observe Hamlet uttering his 'to be or not to be' soliloquy while noticing other characters in the background as well: unless the comic artist is able to develop innovative solutions, such an extensive control of spatial relations dangerously translates on the page into a monotonous frontal perspective and a wide panoramic frame, at the expense of visual variety and narrative rhythm. The main challenge of the theatrical space is connected to the audience's individual contribution and personal vision: «the spectator in the theatre controls his own spatial relationships as he answers the needs of his perception» (Styan 1977: 21), while space in comics follows different rules.

## Space in Comics

Character, action, and environment are the three fixed elements, related to each other and always simultaneously present, of comic narration (Moro 1991: 32). Visual narration also includes the time of the story, the time where the story is set and the time as the duration of the reading process. This is why space and time are linked: the panel symbolically represents a space which acquires a temporal dimension as the reading proceeds. It is the reader who assigns a time and a duration to the action represented in the panel, and the length of dialogues in the balloons reinforces the expression of time through space (Gubern 1976: 35). Far from being a mere background, the comic space selects the perspective which will dominate the panel: space is an «open sign» (Krafft 1982: 54), limited only by the borders of the panel. By imposing a specific gaze, space can help shape the reader's perception, as when blurred and undefined spatial elements – mere profiles, for instance – may signal the need to focus on the figures in the foreground. Thus, analyzing the space and its function in the panel is to understand if it has a mere function of background or if it controls the understanding of situations or characters' psychology.

It is the continuous tension between the story and the panel which drives comics forward: by absorbing the image in a stream of frames, the story tends to make the reader forget the individual images, whereas the

panel isolates the image and forces the reader to focus on it (Peeters 2000: 39). Space in comics, however, involves more than the setting or the background of a panel: it also includes the disposition of the panels on the page and the space they occupy as well. Panels are distributed and combined into a narrative across the gutter, but the reader makes them a whole in the process of closure, as Mc Cloud called it: the ability to observe the part and to perceive the whole (Pratt 2009: 111), so that, bridging the temporal and spatial gap symbolized by the gutter, the reader transforms two panels into a uniformed and unified image and idea. Finally, space functions as a cohesive element: the narrative is strengthened by characters occupying a certain location one panel after the other (Mikkonen 2011: 641).

Comics combine the arts of drawing and painting (in all their various forms from caricature to abstraction to photorealism), the layout elements of print media, the verbal tropes of literature, the visual narrative language of film, and the storytelling of serials, and then they transform these shared elements into something different from their uses in other media (Smith 2011: 112).

What acquires importance on the stage, then, might not be equally relevant on the page. Comics engaging with theatrical adaptations are constantly confronted with the image of the actor and his/her performance on the stage. The bi-dimensional images in the panel, static by nature, are challenged by the actors' dynamicity. When trying to define how the theatrical space is translated into comics, the question is not only to see 'what is shown', but, retracing the theatrical perspective, 'how it is shown': this is why space can be pivotal in adapting Shakespeare for comics, as an element which can contribute to a successful translation.

The main criterion which determined the choice of the case studies included in the following analysis is their innovative artistic approach to the play, which, in turn, reflects on the spatial dimension.

*Classics Illustrated*, *Topolino* and *Il Giornalino* (which published *Amleto* and *Romeo and Juliet* illustrated by DeLuca) are ideally (but not

exclusively or rigidly) addressed to young readers, while Zarate's adaptation belongs to a collection explicitly intended for young students. While the target audience appears to be homogeneous, the styles and the artistic vision are diversified and enriched by one more key feature: all the case studies are adaptations, not general offsprings<sup>7</sup>. Their bond with theatre being willingly stronger but not constraining, these adaptations move freely around their play of reference, offering a diversified scenario. The following case studies, then, approach, reinterpret and depict Shakespeare's theatrical space in different ways, as a demonstration not only of the mediator's importance in interpreting the play and in representing it in a unique style, but also of the way the spatial organization of the panels, their sequence and their distribution on the page might stand out from the usual representation and contribute to innovating the medium.

## Shakespearean Spaces in Comics

### *Classics Illustrated*

*Classics Illustrated* (CI), originally known as *Classic Comics* and published by Gilberton Company from 1941 to 1971, was the first attempt to merge comics and literature: having noticed that children were more interested in comics than books, CI creator Albert Kanter introduced them to literature in a pleasing way, as suggested by the message at the end of each issue: «now that you have read the *Classics Illustrated* edition, don't miss the added enjoyment of reading the original, obtainable at your school or public library».

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<sup>7</sup> Among the graphic adaptations of Shakespeare's plays (without considering the offsprings) are also *The Manga Shakespeare* series, which started in 2007 by Self Made Hero, and the *No Fear Shakespeare* series (Spark Publishing, 2008, which features *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*), a hybrid of the actual Shakespeare's language and the modernized versions from the *No Fear Shakespeare* translations freely available online.

Among the Shakespearean tragedies adapted in *CI* are *Julius Caesar*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*. The *CI* series was labeled as spurious, due to the absence of superheroes, and, as a confirmation of the prejudice towards popular cultural expressions, deemed unworthy of dealing with the classics of Western canon. It was guilty of polluting classic literature and subverting high culture (Jones 2002: 6). Despise such strict critical evaluation, a closer look allows to see that, in dealing with Shakespeare, *CI* actually sacrificed on the altar of the reverence to the classic more than one feature of comic-book art. Shakespeare's Early-Modern language (with the exception of the captions which are in contemporary English) is carefully preserved: his language was certainly abridged, but never rewritten. Given the audience of reference, it appears quite a rigorous approach: however, «a student of popular culture can learn much from *Classics Illustrated* about postwar America's assumptions about the interests and capacities of its children» (Jones 2002: 4). This might also have been related to the desire to elevate the status of the work or to compensate the inevitable loss of some features by leaving at least one intact. It surely must not have been an easy task for the illustrator: «the Bard elicited what was perhaps Blum's greatest single effort» (*ibid.*: 85), but the main consequence of such a rigorous linguistic perspective was to forsake some essential features of comic storytelling, as the balance between words and space of the panel. In *CI*, long and dense balloons expand on the panel, forcing the reader to dilate the reading time at the expense of the overall rhythm. The time span of the single panel is dependent on the words in the balloons, for one infers the probable duration of the lines from one's own experience (Pratt 2009: 109): in 1952 *Hamlet*, the difference between the scene preceding the ghost's appearance, where the lines are quick and there is space for at least three panels in one page, and Hamlet's soliloquy, where a bulky balloon leaves very little freedom to the spatial development and forces the panel to expand, is directly related to the amount of words used, which, in turn, translated into a slower pace and a hesitant rhythm.



Classics Illustrated # 99 Hamlet, New York, Gilberton Publications, 1952: 4; 15

In this *Hamlet*, «the storytelling duties fall completely to the text» (Jones 2002: 85), and so does the space of the panel: the characters are not dynamically perceived because of the length of the monologues, and Hamlet's intellectual action does not find a dynamic graphic representation.

While the target medium suffered because of the loss of one important component, a certain attention to the theatrical dimension of the source text can still be detected, for characters are drawn in poses which recall and are inspired by actors on stage: «characters and settings were drawn in such a way that the reader might sense he was viewing an artistic rendering of an actual performance of Hamlet» (Wetmore 2006: 176) <sup>8</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> In the 1990 edition of *Hamlet*, however (Varnum – Gibbons 2007: 140) space in the panel contributes to building the atmosphere, as when columns and arches frame Hamlet as if he was in a cage; the landscape is far from evoking calmness: the towers casting shadows and the waves symbolize fear and anxiety. There is also a different representation of monologues: a chain of balloons divides the thread of thoughts into three neat moments, clarifying it



Classics Illustrated # 99 Hamlet, New York, Gilberton Publications, 1952: 21

The lesson which can be drawn from *CI* attempt to preserve the Shakespearean text whenever possible is that comics entail a different approach to the text, regardless of its dramatic and literary canonicity: while one of the reasons for the lavish language of Elizabethan theatre was to compensate the lack of visual reference, such problem does not concern comics, where the balance between image and words is crucial in terms of rhythm and panel design.

### *Othello* by Oscar Zarate: Space as Impression

Together with a *King Lear* illustrated by Ian Pollock, *Othello* is part of the 'Cartoon Shakespeare' series published by Oval Projects in 1984. Just as *CI*, *Othello* greatly preserves the original language, providing an unabridged version of the play and presenting brief captions which only features the act and the characters. Readers are nonetheless guided by a

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for the reader. Moreover, the dialogue is still represented as spoken, so the character addresses the reader as the actor the audience.

brief summary of the plot and an introductory guide to frame the character of Othello in Elizabethan times.

Oscar Zarate's *Othello*, whose rendition visually experiments with varying angles, shifting perspectives and panel shapes but also with the use of color, is characterized by a vivid non-mimetic inspiration. Zarate's solutions for spatial organization of panels do not seek realism and are all the more interesting and visually captivating because of the original exploitation of the medium potential. Some recurring symbolic elements contribute to adding coherence and further guiding the reader. In the following panels, the eagle initially stands out as a black shadow against a white background, then it is recalled by Iago's hands, like claws on Othello's shoulder, and finally it flies around Othello and smashes a mirror, signaling the victory of Iago's persuasion.



*Othello- the Complete Play Illustrated by Oscar Zarate, London, The Can of Worms Press, 2005: 65; 67*

In Zarate's illustrations, the key to express the emotion of the tragedy and translate it into images also lies in the way the space of each panel is shaped and organized on the page, so that the ensemble is coherent with the character portrayed: panels resembling shattered

pieces of glass, showing only fragments of Othello's figure, are functional to the visual translation of Othello's shattered mind.



*Othello- the Complete Play Illustrated by Oscar Zarate, London, The Can of Worms Press, 2005: 68*

Even in regular rectangular panels, a space progressively deformed in shape and surreal in color helps identifying Othello's descent into madness: panels filled with electric blues and greens and Iago's unnaturally elongated figure project the reader into Othello's perspective.



*Othello- the Complete Play Illustrated by Oscar Zarate, London, The Can of Worms Press, 2005: 85*

Among the high experimental design of panel space, the presence of an (apparently) ordinary space certainly attracts attention and alerts the reader: the bed scene, in fact, is the focus, the space where the tragedy truly happens, and it is not imaginary but real, physical, relatable. The bed scene is a crucial theatrical moment as well: by clearly focusing on Desdemona's murder, it challenges the norm which establishes what can be shown on stage. Zarate at the same time allows and forces the reader to go beyond the curtain of the four-poster bed and witness Desdemona's death by Othello's hand, to see the murder and the madness, something forbidden to a theatrical audience.



*Othello- the Complete Play Illustrated by Oscar Zarate, London, The Can of Worms Press, 2005: 117*

Given the intensity of the scene, there is only one small pause granted, when a change of perspective projects the reader outside the room, following the maid knocking incessantly at the door. Once again, a careful palette of colors highlights the bed: the pale yellow of Desdemona's hair and the purple of the curtains contrast with the dominant black, associated to death (Finlayson 2015: 55). After the

violence is consumed, the purple curtain mercifully closes, only a white hand emerging.



*Othello- the Complete Play Illustrated by Oscar Zarate, London, The Can of Worms Press, 2005: 129*

A tribute to the theatrical dimension of the tragedy is paid at the end: the curtains of the bed, this time revealing a black hand over a black one, become the curtain of the stage, which now can fall on the tragedy.

### *Il Principe Duckleto*

*Il Principe Duckleto* was published in 'Topolino', a comic book with a strong tradition of stories adapted from literary masterpieces.

This recent adaptation (November 2016) from Disney Italia stands out from previous Disney parodies thanks to a renovated commitment to reproducing the various features of the tragedy as closely as the Disney's 'canone di liceità' (Argiolas et al. 2013) allows. A careful selection of atmosphere and settings, in fact, can communicate the character's feelings without necessarily relying on those words which were so essential in Elizabethan theatre but not in this adaptation. However, a predictable amount of rewriting coexists with skillfully

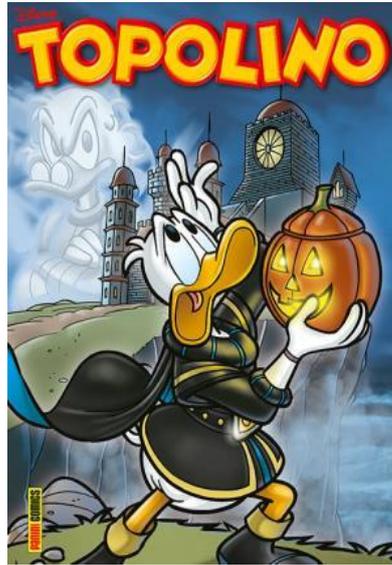
conjured references to the original lines. Giorgio Salati, the author of the script, claims to have devised a fairly faithful adaptation in terms of plot and language (Topolino #3184 2016: 43), without forgetting the typical parodic and surreal humor which is the distinctive feature of *Topolino*: for instance, Paperofelia in her madness sings some verses which closely remind of 'Io Vagabondo', a classic Italian song from the late Seventies (*ibid.*: 53).

In a space (mainly, the castle) generally free from menacing features, the melancholy and the sense of desolation of some particular panels counterbalance the comic aspects, however present, and show the will to work on an emotional response as well as the attempt to recreate that mixture of tragic and comic which was one of the features of Shakespeare's theatre.

The cover is then eloquent: Donald Duck (in a black medieval outfit, as Hamlet is usually portrayed) holding a pumpkin (reminiscent of the traditional skeleton) in a typical theatrical pose already signals a greater regard for the theatrical roots of the text<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> The story is divided into acts and the first caption reproduces the typical stage direction at the beginning of an act: 'enter the king, the queen'. References to the performance and its mechanisms are scattered throughout the story: in the second panel of page 23 Scrooge is aware of the importance of a good exit: «Sgrunt! Non rovinarmi l'uscita di scena!» («Don't ruin my exit!», translation mine).



Topolino #3184, the cover (2016)

There is nothing truly menacing in the way the castle is drawn, with a predominance of reassuring rounded lines, but the details set the tone and visually establish the difference from the previous Hamlet-inspired parody, *Paperino principe di Dunimarca*: the cliff, the mist and the night sky convey the idea of gloominess and darkness.

Hints at the theatrical origin of the story are scattered throughout the comics from the beginning: in the opening page the drapes at the bottom corners remind of a curtain which has just opened, making the panel ambiguous: is it representing the wide hall of a castle or is it revealing a theatrical stage?



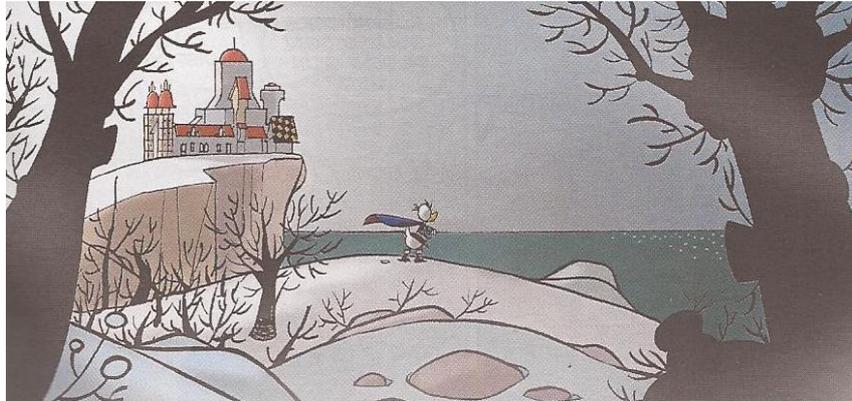
Topolino #3184 2016: 14.

In *Il Principe Duckleto* space is a device which truly boost the scene. The solemnity of Duckleto's promise of avenging the King/Scrooge is empowered by the angle chosen for the last panel on page 22. After a series of shots and reverse shots, the angle rises, emphasizing how small the two characters are in comparison to the surroundings. The same projection reappears later, where the upward angle, highlighting the starred sky, is perfectly integrated with the lines.



Topolino #3184 2016: 26

Space sometimes becomes the sole protagonist of some panels, characterized by an unusual exploitation of silence, as when a central panel embraces a panoramic view, with the snow evoking silence and cold, completed by bare trees in the foreground. The chosen perspective almost forces the reader to spy on Duckleto, a small figure surrounded by the magnificence of the sea and by a menacing cliff. It certainly contrasts with the panel immediately above, with its clear comic atmosphere.



Topolino #3184 (2016) p. 29

«Silence has the effect of removing a panel from a particular span of time [...] without the implicit time stamp which words provide, a silent panel doesn't end quite as crisply and the effect of it can linger throughout the page» (Mc Cloud 2006: 164).

This panel, in principle, closely recreates the perception of an actor on stage lingering in silence to convey a certain emotion. The same device is reprised when silence emphasizes the dramatic thoughts which precede the 'tessere o non tessere' dilemma, and, later, when a pumpkin triggers Duckletto's memory of Yorick.



Topolino #3184 (2016) p. 36



Topolino #3184 2016: 60

The choice of translating 'to be or not to be' with 'tessere o non tessere' represents a complex intertextual game, nonetheless respectful of the Shakespearean linguistic essence. Few translators would tamper with probably the most iconic line from Shakespeare's production. Given the nature of this adaptation, however, Giorgio Salati transforms 'essere o non essere' (the literal Italian translation) into 'tessere o non tessere' (to weave or not to weave) with an initial consonant change reminiscent of Gino Patroni's style<sup>10</sup>. Such choice, however, impacts on

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<sup>10</sup> Italian writer and journalist (1920-1992), who wrote mainly aphorisms and epigram parodies based on puns and paradoxical word play. *Duckletto* is also rich in reprises of lines from the original play, recognizable to theatre lovers but less detectable by younger readers, who are not supposed to be familiar with Shakespeare yet. In the last panel of this sequence, Duckletto's line «Dove saranno ora tutte quelle zucche sogghignanti, i pupazzi, i giochi... quelle burle che facevano scoppiare d'allegria le tavolate?» is clearly taken from V.1, v. 166-68: «Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar?».

the overall setting of the scene, where space and words need to be harmonious: the reference to weaving imposes the presence of a loom, reducing the alternatives in the panel design. This is a case where the words determine the way the space and the panel are organized, also deviating decisively from the traditional stage tradition.

The end of the characters' adventures and the conclusion of the story (however unusually contemplative, to call it tragedy would be inappropriate) mark a visible shift also in the tones used to represent space, with brighter and more vivid colors; the final panel pays once more homage to the theatrical roots of the play (although not with historical accuracy), with the characters gathered together for a final curtain call, the last setting of the previous panel still visible as background scenography and an eloquent caption: 'E così si conclude la storia di Duckleto e Paperone, Paperofelia e tutti i personaggi della corte di Danimarca che hanno messo in scena per voi questo dramma!'<sup>11</sup>.

### *Amleto and Romeo e Giulietta* by Gianni DeLuca

The Shakespeare-inspired comics published by 'Il Giornalino' were illustrated by Gianni De Luca and written by Raoul Traverso (*Amleto*, *Romeo e Giulietta* and *La Tempesta* were published between 1975 and 1976). Raoul Traverso (known as Sigma) writes a basic script, where the monologues are reduced, some episodes are cut, and the language is simplified. It is a true rewriting operation which, in order to be fully understood, needs to be contextualized into the catholic framework of 'Il Giornalino'<sup>12</sup>.

The verbal code suffers while the iconic one thrives: De Luca managed to explore theatricality by transforming the space of the panel

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<sup>11</sup> «And so ends the story of Duckleto and Scrooge, DaisyOphelia and all the characters of the Court of Denmark who staged this drama for you!»; (translation mine).

<sup>12</sup> In *Amleto*, doubts on suicide and afterlife and the graveyard scene are avoided, while in *Romeo e Giulietta* minor but colorful characters such as the Nurse are toned down so as not to clash with Catholic sensibility.

into the space of the stage and by recreating a spatial and temporal perception closer to the theatrical one. «Gianni De Luca è stato un anticipatore. [...] Se le storie fossero state più trasgressive, avrebbe forse avuto il rilievo internazionale che meritava» (Rotundo – Vignati: 2011, 67)<sup>13</sup>.

Far from promoting a simplistic or superficial idea of comics, De Luca wanted his work to be an authentic form of art, as the use of the so-called «formato d'autore» (Raffaelli 1997: 93), ideal to experiment with different styles, suggests. Further motivation to pursue such goals came from the model reader of 'Il Giornalino':

Soddisferò anche l'attesa principale, quella che il ragazzino di borgata non sa nemmeno di avere, che è l'attesa del bello, della sua educazione e conoscenza, che è un'attesa che c'è in chiunque, anche se non lo sa, anche se la prende per fame di bignè o di altro, ma che invece è quello che lo fa uomo<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> 'De Luca was a pioneer.[...] Had his stories been more transgressive he would have had the international praise he deserved' (translation mine).

<sup>14</sup> 'I will satisfy also the main hunger, the one the average boy does not even know he has. The hunger for beauty, for its education and knowledge. It is a hunger everyone has without even knowing it, mistaken for desire of sweets or else, but that is what makes the boy a man'. (<http://www.fumettologica.it/2015/01/gianni-de-luca-intervista/>, translation mine). Deluca was extremely aware of the opposing forces at work in the editorial policy related to the audience and the purpose of comics in the cultural market: «Una politica editoriale che si rispetti è quella che riuscendo a vendere, educa. Vedi, il Fumetto nasce con questa contraddizione addosso. È espressione tipica della cultura di massa, e lo è nel bene e nel male. Da un lato esprime la voglia e la capacità della gente (di tutta la gente) di impossessarsi di questa cultura. Dall'altro, e proprio per questo, è industria, profitto, sottomissione bieca alle leggi di mercato» (A worthy editorial policy is the one which educates while selling. Comics are born with this inherent contradiction. They are, for better or worse, a typical expression of mass culture. On the one hand, they express the will and ability of people (of *all*

This contribution will focus on *Romeo e Giulietta* and on *Amleto*, as examples of DeLuca's renovation. In comics, the usual expression of space involves sequenced panels of varying dimension through which the narrative develops: different panels host different spaces (or portions of space) and different scenes (Pratt 2009: 112), so that a change in background indicates a spatial relocation. Moreover, «any substantial amount of movement, whether it takes place across different backgrounds and scenes or consists of multiple movements inside the same scene, requires multiple panels» (*ibid.*). DeLuca renovates such practices: in *Romeo e Giulietta* two spaces, sometimes even three, coexist in the same wide panel, in a geometrical, precise and wide perspective which occupies the whole page. For instance, three different spaces are represented here below: the city square on the left, Juliet's room in the middle, and the street adjacent to the Capulet's house on the right. The balance and the geometry of the panel is ensured by placing the scene with Juliet, her mother and the Nurse in the middle, as the focus of the reader's attention, and by having the walls of the room symbolizing the walls of the house, along which walk the young Montecchi and his friends.

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people) to appropriate such culture. On the other hand, they are profit, industry, blind submission to market rules. All translations mine).



Romeo e Giulietta dall'opera di William Shakespeare, Firenze, Blackvelvet, 2012: 7-8

*Amleto* further perfects such new organization, with wide panels on each page showing one unified space, in which the characters move freely.



*Amleto*: dall'opera di William Shakespeare, Firenze, Blackvelvet, 2012: 25

De Luca subverts the habit of portraying movement through multiple panels: borrowing from the futuristic approach to photography, he reproduces the impression of motion by showing a succession of characters' poses, by fixating all the micro-movements which constitute the action, so that the characters appear fluid and active but always inside the same panel/page. Such technique is a creative alternative to the usual representation of monologues: the multiple impressions erase the stillness of the character and give life to the panel, as on page 32 of *Amleto*, where Hamlet's spiraling and circular patterns of motion create a virtually endless walk.



*Amleto: dall'opera di William Shakespeare, Firenze, Blackvelvet, 2012: 32*

In comics, the rhythm of the narration depends on the inner trace imposed by the chain of panels, whose construction can either dilate or compress the flow (Raffaelli 1997: 16): in DeLuca's panels, the rhythm becomes more and more similar in intention to that of a performance. Moreover, the reader is forced to follow the character as the audience follows the actors: if the unique characteristic of comics lies in the subjectivity (*ibid.*: 17), which depends on the reader, DeLuca has found a way to challenge it by playing with the dilation of the reading time and

the parallel dilation of the space of the panel. Implications of such artistic choice go even further. The reader's imagination usually links the panels, filling the gaps between what is shown in the panel and what is omitted (Moro 1991: 2). DeLuca's adaptations overthrow this basic principle by showing the sequence of actions inside one panel which represents the unified space in which the actions take place. The constant presence of spatial references in *Romeo and Giulietta* and in *Amleto* breaks the general rule according to which space is omitted when not important: De Luca wants the reader to be fully aware of the space the characters are moving in, and sparingly adopts close ups borrowed from cinematic shots which usually drive all the attention to the character (*ibid*: 51). One of these few exceptions is found in particularly dramatic panels when Juliet's desperation in learning of Romeo's exile is mirrored and empowered by the loss of setting and spatial reference; the same choice is replicated in the panel where Juliet drinks the deadly potion.

Finally, DeLuca's *Amleto* is markedly characterized by references to the theatrical dimension, especially to the performance: not only do the panels aim at reproducing for the reader the perspective of the audience looking at the stage, they actually become a stage where characters enter and exit as actors:



*Amleto: dall'opera di William Shakespeare, Firenze, Blackvelvet, 2012: 32-33*

Significantly, in DeLuca's *Amleto* the rare references to the 'classic' traditional narrative of comic art are preserved for actions happening outside of the stage, as the flashback where the ghost reveals the details of his assassination, rendered with two strips whose drawing style is reminiscent of polychrome windows.

## **Conclusions**

This paper aimed at underlining how comics have dealt with the inevitable link to Shakespeare's theatre. Instead of focusing on a literal and rather cumbersome reproduction of the language, the case studies prove that successful reinterpretations of Shakespeare find a powerful ally in the multiple possibilities of comics space and in an original approach to the target medium: the red thread of the most convincing adaptations lies in the renovated spatial organization of the panels and in the exploitation of spatial details as a means to complete and fulfill the interpretation of the play. From the rigorous approach in *CI* to the impressionistic interpretation of Zarate's adaptations, the case studies traced a chronological demonstration of the evolution of the medium and the increasing confidence in its possibilities, a proof that Shakespeare's survival in popular imagination can benefit from new approaches established by different media, which can challenge, refresh, and renew a consolidated success.

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