When the Present Makes Contact with the Past: Comic Adaptations and Translations of Medieval and Early Modern Sources

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In past papers at the Plymouth State University Medieval & Renaissance Forum, I have advocated for the use of comics in the classroom despite the fact that this is a relatively modern and contemporary genre as opposed to the field of literature that many members of the audience teach to their students. Comics provide a different way to engage readers and help many students to ease into the material in a lower-risk format allowing them to either make new connections to the original source material or reinforce previously discussed themes and ideas. I concluded my presentation from last year with the call for increased work in the field of adapting these medieval and Early Modern sources into comics form to better aid in their use throughout high school and post-secondary classrooms, and only months later, *The Graphic Canon* was published[1]. I'd like to consider this article to be a continuation of the same discussion.

Before launching into a discussion of adaptation versus translation within the greater context of a review of *The Graphic Canon*, I think it's worth taking just a moment to examine why teachers in secondary and post-secondary institutions will find comics and graphic collections worthwhile investments in their classes. Unfortunately, some readers are still steeped in the stereotypical mindset that comics are just for kids. The reality is this couldn't be farther from the truth.

In 2012, Seven Studios published the first of a multi-volume series, *The Graphic Canon*—an anthology with selections of traditional works in comics form that touts a range of world literature from "The epic of Gilgamesh to Shakespeare to *Dangerous Liaisons*." With the continued growth of interest in the comics medium, this article will focus on providing a review of this collected work within the context of a discussion on adaptation and translation in order to address the question: What is exchanged, lost, or left behind in moments of contact between the original, text-driven source and the contemporary, text-and-image hybrid? In responding to the question of what is gained and lost through these moments of literary contact, I want to begin my discussion with looking at some of what gets lost in this

attempt at canon-building before examining some of the benefits gained from a relatively new medium coming into contact with a set of far older sources.

Russ Kick's first volume of *The Graphic Canon*—there are two additional volumes that focus on Western literature from the 19th Century to the present day—attempts to embrace a wide range of World literature from the Classics up to Colonial America. Weighing in at just over 500 pages (including the indices), it is clear the work prioritizes breadth over depth in relation to the works selected. And yet, how broad ranging can a text be if only 500 pages are allocated to cover thousands of years?

Further, it is important to point out that while this text attempts to expose readers to a broad range of regions, from which it draws its sources, scholars and teachers will be quick to notice the significant Western bias. Of the 56 total works included, 40 hail from traditionally Western sources such as the Judeo-Christian bible to Chaucer and Shakespeare and ending with works from American colonies. Kristian Williams points out in a review on *The Comics Journal* that Kick's attempt at inclusivity "may even prove self-defeating" given the significant Western bias present in the regions represented and those either marginalized or left out altogether (Williams). The difficulties with inclusivity do not end with regional disparities. Considering there are two additional volumes in the works, it is more than a little surprising that the first volume is responsible for covering classical antiquities up to the 18th Century. In spite of these problems, there are few works today that have attempted such an ambitious project of bringing together such a wide variety of different sources from different regions and periods using the comics medium; as such, I believe it is worth taking a closer look at the works included in this hefty volume. Teachers looking to use comics in their classrooms will find a variety of graphic adaptations from the original sources, and depending on the needs of the classroom, this work could prove to be a valuable resource for any number of course reading lists.

So what can one expect from the excerpts included in this comics anthology? Given that the writing and artistic responsibilities shift from source to source, the aesthetic approach and faithfulness to the source material varies. Moreover, teachers should not expect complete translations of original sources; instead, the selected extracts generally provide abridged adaptations of the source material. Individuals expecting complete renderings of the source will then be disappointed; however, that these excerpts are not exact translations should not disqualify them from consideration nor devalue them. There is an important difference between an "adaptation" and "translation" when considering reading selections for our classrooms that are in comic form. The OED defines "adaptation" as "an altered or amended version of a text, musical composition, etc., (now *esp.*) one adapted for filming, broadcasting, or production on the stage from a novel or similar literary source" ("Adaptation"). Other definitions that follow generally refer to changes in the form of a subject so that it is better suited to a new environment or situation. Since comics make use of visual imagery as a means of conveying ideas, the result is

that much of the exposition from a source is condensed into the visual form. Depending on how this is accomplished, it can prove either simplistic or highly effective.

How exactly does a translation differ from an adaptation given the definition above? If the OED views "translation" as the "expression or rendering of something in another medium or form" or the "transference of meaning" from one language to another ("Translation"), is there much of a difference? Perhaps not on the surface; yet, there seems to be an interest in maintaining a strong sense of fidelity to the original source within the newly transcribed text. An adaptation, however, seems to allow for greater creative license on the part of the adaptor to amend elements of the original source in order to better suit the new medium. In his introduction to *The Graphic Canon Vol. 1,* Kick regularly uses the term "adaptation"—and not translation—as he explains his editorial vision, which he imparted upon his artistic collaborators:

> I asked the artists to stay true to the source material – no setting it in the future, no creating new adventures for characters…I wasn't interested in a workman-like, note-by-note transcription of the original work. The adaptations are true collaborations between the original authors/poets and the [current] artists. (Kick 1)

Herein lies the key difference between these two concepts, which Kick touches upon in his creative charge. Form becomes a much more significant factor in a comic adaptation whereas content arguably outweighs form in a conventional language-centric translation. Of course, there are exceptions. James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* especially prove to be impenetrable for many readers; however, their form has had a profound effect on twentieth and twenty-first century writers' approaches to the written word. Still, I argue the Joyces of the literary world are the exception—not the rule—in this matter.

An adaptation, unlike the translation, seeks to capitalize on the new form in which the content takes shape, while still maintaining fundamental core elements of its original source. Its success or failure is determined in large part on how well the new medium is used to communicate and contribute to a new and more nuanced appreciation of the content. A translation's success, however, may be generally determined based upon the strict fidelity to the original content with less concern over form. In relation to comics, this will be an important point to consider given the abridged nature of the medium when a comic is based on a more traditional, language-based text. Were the creative choices of inclusion (and omission) effective, or did they somehow negatively impact the reader's experience of the narrative?

In the case of Seymour Chwast's adaptations of *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Divine Comedy,* this graphic adaptation results in a significant reduction of the source material. Given the space and number of works included in this hefty anthology, Kick's emphasis on "extreme abridgements" is understandable (Kick 1). Looking at Chwast's relation of the "Wife of Bath's Prologue" and tale, he does

manage to cover the general plot points, but the overly simple style does little to enhance the reader's appreciation of what is one of the best-known selections of the entire work. Where Chaucer's original source is 1,265 lines with two-thirds of the selection dedicated to the prologue, we see in Chwast's adaptation that far more time is allocated to the tale. Given that the tale itself is arguably secondary to the prologue and there is no rationale provided for the change, it does raise questions as to why this decision was made.

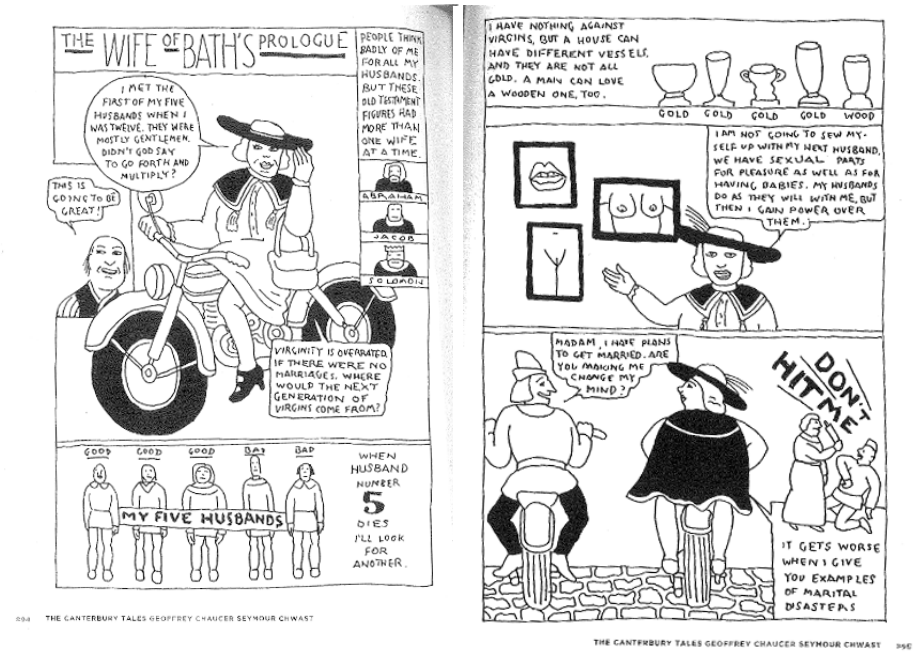

Fig. 1

Additionally, Chwast shows a tendency in both of his contributions to incorporate contemporary elements to his art without any explanation as to their meaning, nor do they appear to factor into the narrative in any meaningful way. In anachronistic fashion, Chwast has Alison astride a motorcycle wearing clothing that is of a later period in time; yet, the men pictured in her selection appear clothed in traditional garb. Certainly, an adaptation can still be successful regardless of whether it has or has not incorporated changes that deviate from the original work, but these deviations should attempt to take advantage of the visual nature of the comics medium to communicate either original themes and ideas or even new ones while still maintaining the overall spirit of the original work. Although Chwast is arguably faithful to the general content, both of his works seem to fail to utilize the comics form to enhance the reader's experience. Instead, he opts to deliver more of a visual plot summary in both "The Wife of Bath" and in his rendering of *The Divine Comedy*.

In spite of my criticism of Chwast, however, there is value to his contributions when thinking about including his work in a classroom setting. Although teachers may find Chwast's approach to be less than dynamic and lacking in detail, it could be useful to compare his adaptations of *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Divine Comedy* to the original sources from Chaucer and Alighieri. Beginning with a grounding in the original prose, students could compile a list of personality traits and physical features of the characters Chaucer provides his readers in the prologue and tale from the "Wife of Bath." Next, students could conduct a close reading of Chwast to see which of these elements he emphasizes, minimalizes, or leaves out altogether. In doing so, students would be forced to conduct close analyses of Alison and her cast of characters. Moreover, this would also provide students with an opportunity to engage in comparative, literary criticism without the need to necessarily steep them in literary theory. An activity such as this could facilitate a better understanding of the three-dimensional nature of Chaucer's characters through having them fill in the missing gaps that Chwast's work creates. Through comparing and contrasting this abridged visual summary to the original source, students would find themselves engaged in a close reading that better grounds their understanding of the persons involved in the prologue and tale.

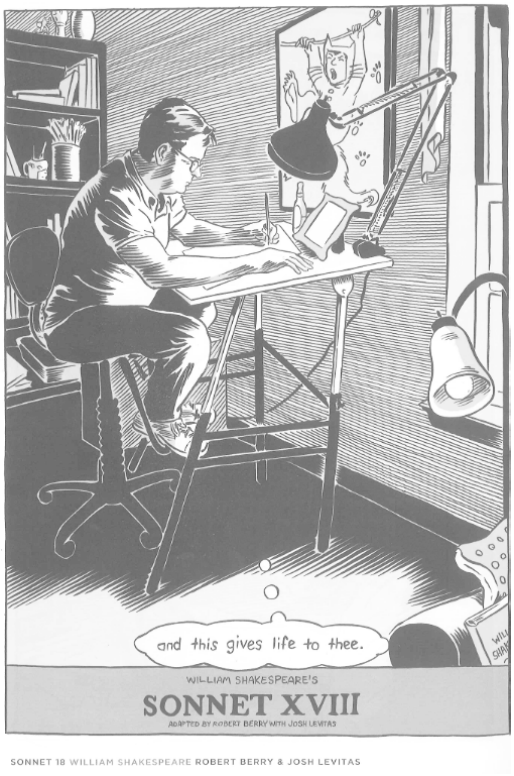

Fig. 2

But fear not! Even with its problems, Kick's collection includes some truly excellent selections as well. The strongest example of a graphic adaptation of a medieval/Early Modern work from this collection can be seen in Robert Berry and Josh Levita's rendering of William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18." One could almost argue this entry in *The Graphic Canon* could be a translation as it includes the entirety of the poem while providing a visual representation that runs parallel to the poem, although it provides a very unique reading from standard interpretations of the poem's narrator and subject. The heavy inks and lack of color lends to the bittersweet emotions of the narrator whose world is certainly less colorful. The only shade readers do see is not the standard red of erotic passion—the emotion often associated with the narrator of this poem—but instead, a soft and warm yellow—akin to the sunlight and a far better choice given that we are to read the subject as the speaker's mother—and not lover. The vignettes Berry and Johnson construct depict both the happy memories of the speaker and his mother from the past, as well as the sorrowful present, following her funeral, in which every panel poignantly complements each line of the poem. Few readers would have thought to view this famous poem of Shakespeare's through this particular lens, and yet, the interpretation holds remarkably well.

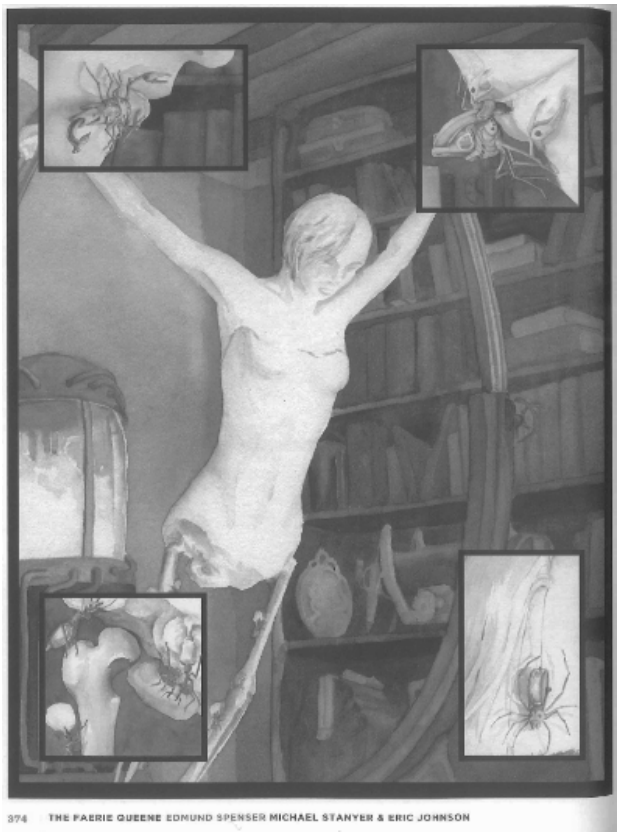

Fig. 3

Another excellent example of a comic that adapts the original source into comics is Michael Stanyer and Eric Johnson's steam-punk adaptation of Sir Edmund Spenser's epic poem, "The Faerie Queen." The selection appearing in *The Graphic Canon vol. 1* comes from Book 3, Canto 8, which centers on the devil's visit to the witch's workshop where the false Florimell is under construction. Like many of the selections in this collection, a more complete version is available—though in this case, it is online. As the creators mention on their website,

> We've done a "steam punk" take on this Renaissance classic: Spenser's Faerie Land is re-imagined with Knights in steam powered mechanical armor, sporting swords and lances against one another, but reaching for their fire arms when faced with monsters. Meanwhile, we preserve Spenser's use of sprites and spirits. Our Faerie Land is a mix of magic and fantastic machinery. (Stanyer and Johnson)

Admittedly, there aren't many elements of steam-punk contained in this brief passage aside from the modernized clothing and subtly revealed mechanical "octopus" arms that the witch employs. However, the more complete online version does exemplify the sort of creative and unique twist to the original poem in this adaptation, as this contemporary genre comes into contact with its Early Modern inspiration. Moreover, Stanyer and Johnson combine not only this Victorian-infused fiction genre with a Renaissance source, but the form of their work blends an eye-catching mix of painting and photography to form the comic aesthetic. The witch's construction of False Florimell with the use of various insects creates an otherworldly and chilling depiction of what is otherwise a rather short episode in the grand scheme of the third book of the epic poem. In this regard, one can view the comic convention known as "decompression" to provide an opportunity to slow down the pace of the original source to unpack the events that transpired between the witch and Satan, who conspired together to create the troublesome and false doppelganger of the beautiful and virtuous Florimell. In Stanyer and Johnson's adaptation, we gain some understanding of the intimate history between the devil and the witch—something that was of less interest to Spenser but perhaps appealing to a more contemporary audience. While not an element explicitly included in Spenser's account of this episode, it does lend to a different and nuanced re-imagining of this creation story. More importantly, it shows once again the strength of comic adaptations in their ability to bring new visions into contact with older sources and produce what could be a greater appreciation for the stories being told.

Another work that provides a powerful visual depiction of the original source is Alex Eckman-Lawn's adaptation of Aphra Behn's poem, "Forgive Us Our Trespasses." This late-seventeenth century poem is one that falls in line with many of Behn's works, which focused on themes of sexuality in a period when women were not free to communicate their sexual desires openly in ways contemporary readers are more accustomed. Eckman-Lawn makes a brave choice in uti-

How prone we are to sin;
how sweet were made
The pleasures our resistless
hearts invade.
Of all my crimes, the breach
of all thy laws,
Love, soft bewitching love,
has been the cause.
Of all the paths that vanity has troc
That sure will soonest be forgiven by God
If things on earth may be to heaven resembled

Fig. 4

lizing only two images spread out over the course of three pages to depict the content of the poem, which the reader sees laid out over each page. The old adage: "A picture is worth a thousand words," is one well worth remembering when analyzing comics. A comic creator will often make the decision to use a splash page, which is an entire page depicting a single panel, when he or she wants to create emphasis. The weight of the message or events unfolding is therefore even greater when a double-page spread is used.[2] The DPS shown depicts two people in the nude – a man and woman – each holding a knife and clutching their chest with a gaping wound. What makes this particularly visceral in nature are the flesh-like cords binding the man and woman together with what are barely perceptible lines emanating from their wounds. Although the male appears to be in pain – his face is obscured in shadow and turned partially away from the reader – the female seems far more thoughtful and less distressed, which is surprising given the events laid out on the page.

This confusion over what the reader sees is quickly allayed, however, given the nature of the comics medium. Words complement the visual, and we see Behn's words discussing a collective inclination to sin, "resistless hearts," and the "breaching of all thy laws" (Eckman-Lawn 432). This suggests we are potentially looking at Adam and Eve, naked in Paradise not long after their fall, bound together by their sin and love. The final image reinforces this through the clasped hands, bound together by the red cord of sin and love. Eckman-Lawn mostly keeps to a black and white approach in coloring his art while introducing shades of gray between his two characters. Yet, readers will notice the single color red is used to highlight the bleeding heart of Eve and the cords reaching out from her heart and tying her to Adam, who holds onto the cords over his shoulder as though it were some sort of burden. Not only do we hear Behn's words calling for sympathy and forgiveness for the speaker's flawed pursuit of love, we also see this playing out on the page as well. Yet, Eckman-Lawn does so in such a fashion that he is able to introduce elements to this well-known poem that Behn does not include but could be seen as enhancing the source material. It is a short piece, but it underscores the value a comic adaptation can have when looking at canonical literature.

Considering comics and graphic novels often carry a somewhat more expensive price tag than many more conventional texts, this single source is an excellent place to begin. Teachers can familiarize themselves with the many possible options comics can provide instructors and students *without* incurring the financial burden of buying each of the individual books from which a number of these selections are drawn. Over the course of this short article, I've tried to provide a balanced review of some of the weaknesses and strengths of Russ Kicks' *The Graphic Canon*, in addition to a few of the reasons why this volume (and the later ones for those of who are teaching other, later periods of literature) is worth considering.

I had the opportunity to talk to one of the contributors to the third volume of *The Graphic Canon*, Chandra Free, and she mentioned the challenge of adapting T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland."[3] While her

contributions centered on a later work, the methods were the same for contributors to all volumes specifically commissioned for the anthology. There were parts of the primary source that clearly needed to be either condensed or cut out altogether given her constraints of retelling the poem in only 8 pages. And as we spoke, it came to my mind how similar comic adaptations like these are to the critical theories we more regularly apply to our various works of literature. Both allow readers to discover new facets to familiar works or possibly even entirely different texts from previous readings. We take our present notions and understandings of the culture and world in which we live, and then we attempt to make sense out of the literature from the past—the result often producing a new reading and appreciation of the works of old. While we may not agree with the creative choices of the comic artist or enjoy their particular aesthetic approach in certain selections, this does not mean we cannot appreciate the discussions their contemporary, critical, and visual perspectives can engender amongst ourselves and within our classrooms.

Overall, there are choices made by Russ Kick over which original sources to include, and no doubt, there will be scholars who will bristle when other texts were omitted. Other critics and teachers may question the legitimacy of the creative choices made by some of the artists involved in adapting these canonical texts, whether through viewing the aesthetic approaches as being too cartoonish or not creative enough to make them "feel" literary enough for critical analysis or use in the classroom. I won't argue these points, as there are a few selections that I pointed out, which I felt did not provide compelling adaptations of the source material. To those who find areas where this volume (and others) are lacking, demand more. Reach out to these publishers, editors, and creators. Let them know there *is* an interest in this type of comic. Have an informed opinion about *what* you are looking for and why it's needed.

Unlike many other fields of literature, comics creators are often accustomed to publishing on a far more regular basis, and as such, their livelihood depends upon the response of their reading audience. Not surprisingly, many creators are attuned to their readers and attempt to keep a finger on the vein of cultural shifts. If they know there is a growing voice from within the world of academia calling out for more comic adaptations of canonical literature with an emphasis on quality work, it will get their attention. To paraphrase the voice heard by Ray Kinsella: If you call for it, they will draw.

Notes

[1] An expanded copy of this paper was published in the Spring 2013 volume of the peer-reviewed journal, The Once and Future Classroom.

[2] A double-page spread (or DPS) refers to when a comic uses two adjoining pages to convey one single panel in epic proportion.

[3] If you check my Twitter feed (@fhelvie) from around April 17th for this discussion.

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