

Shakespeare in a New Body

Description:

The website zenpencils.com uses famous quotes or literary works to create online versions of comic strips. Their slogan is, "Cartoon quotes from inspirational folks." The creator of these comic strips, Gavin Aung Than, uses the comments on his work as feedback from viewers and speaks with them regularly about how to improve the drawings. The comics are digitally created and posted online to be viewed by anyone, and are also available to be purchased in a printed version that compiles all of the different works. My chosen artifact is a specific collection that Than created with different Shakespearean plays and sonnet excerpts. This particular work is titled "Shakespeare: A love story in four parts" and includes the same cartoon couple throughout the different excerpts. The couple's relationship is depicted through Shakespeare's plays: King John, Twelfth Night, A Midsummer Night's Dream, and his Sonnet 88.

In Figure 1, the cartoonist has used lines from Act II, Scene I of the play King John to sketch the two characters interacting. The characters, a woman and a man, are seated on a bench, and the man leans over to kiss the woman on her cheek. As he does so, she looks surprised, but she follows by kissing him back on the cheek as well. The scene follows the text to the right of the images, that says, "Upon thy cheek I lay this zealous kiss as seal to the indenture of my love."

Figure 2 shows a scene from the play, Twelfth Night, from Act III, Scene I. The text on the left says, "Love sought is good but giv'n unsought is better." The cartoonist depicts this with the same two characters in the earlier comic strip. The woman appears to arrive home from a tiring day with a sigh as she opens the front door, and once inside, she is met with flower petals leading into the bathroom. Once in the bathroom, she finds her significant other, the male character, waiting for her with a rose in his mouth and a bath ready to be used.

In his depiction of a line from A Midsummer Night's Dream's Act I, Scene I, Gavin Aung Than has drawn the couple in the middle of a fight. The two are seen in the first box yelling angrily at each other, followed by the breaking of a portrait and a vase full of flowers. After the two stare at each other angrily, they are drawn in the next box in bed, looking more relaxed and relieved. The text that has been interpreted this way is, "The course of true love never did run smooth."

Last in Than's compilation of Shakespearean works is Sonnet 88. The comic strip shows the line, "Such is my love, to thee I so belong, that for thy right, myself will bear all wrong" once again, with the aforementioned couple. In the first image box, the two are asleep in a bed together, with the man completely covered by blankets, and the woman curled up without any. In the next few boxes, the woman wakes up because she is cold and hits her partner to jolt him awake and take the blankets back. The last box shows the two sleeping happily together, both covered by blankets.

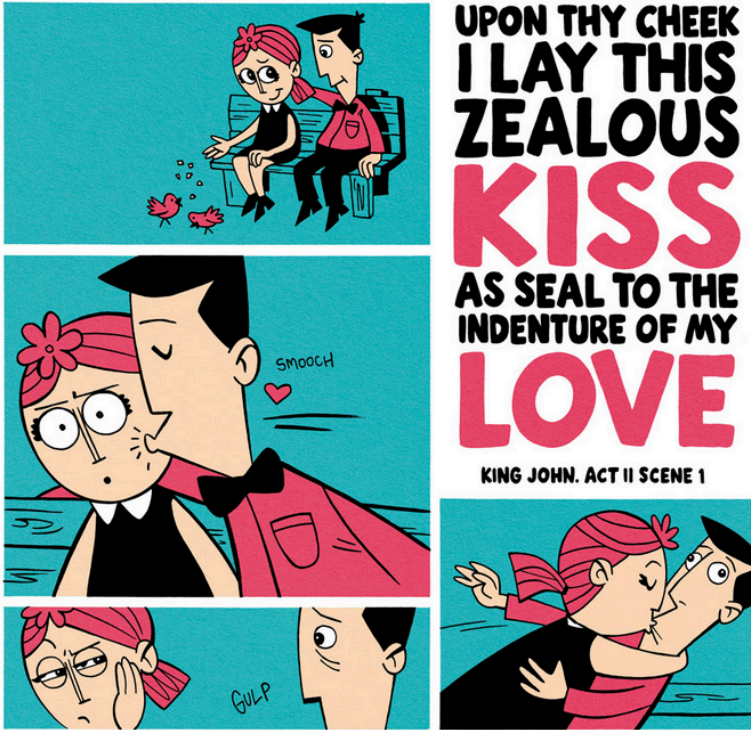


Figure 1

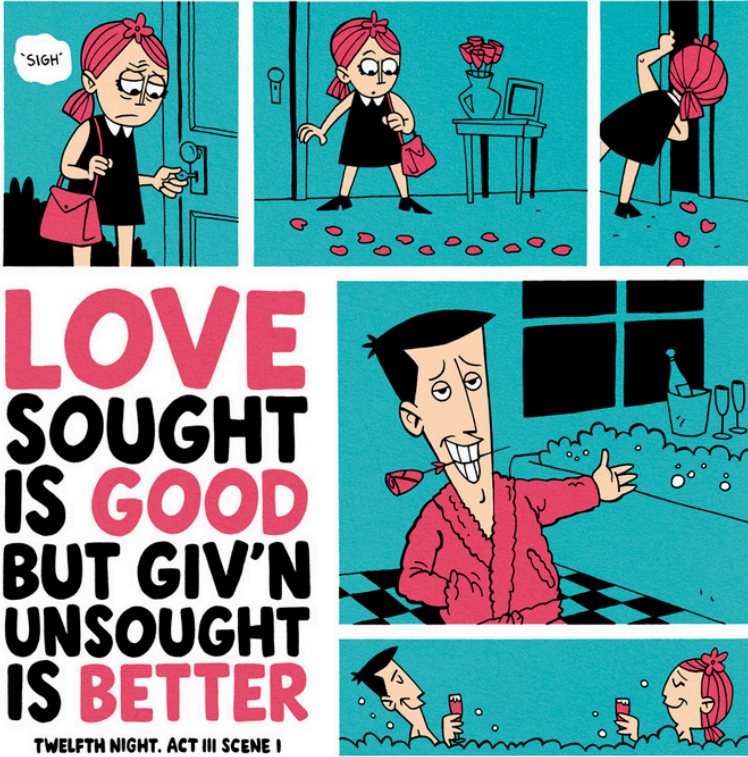


Figure 2

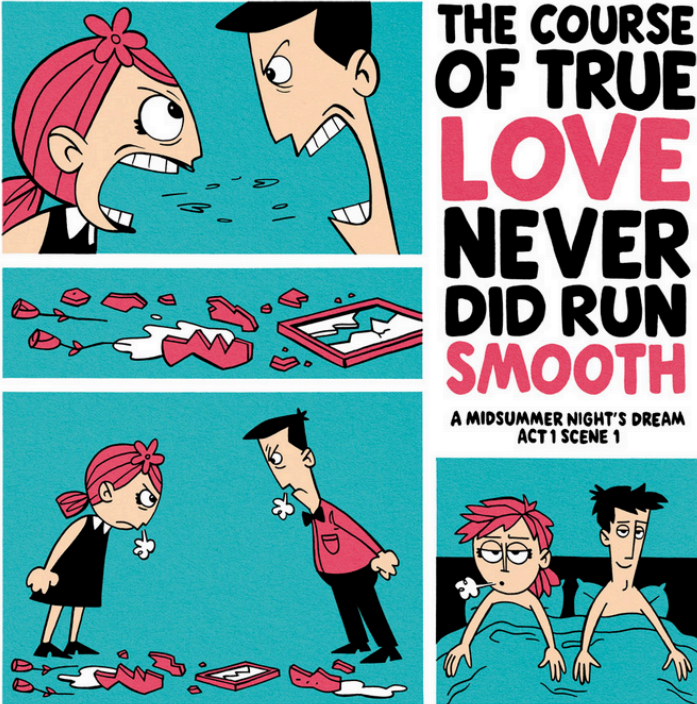


Figure 3



Figure 4

Research Context:

Gavin Aung Than's work "Shakespeare: A love story in four parts" and his other comic-book-style quotes, are an example of graphic literature, visualizations of classic texts, and modern consumption of information and knowledge. Because of its cartoon and visual nature, Than's work can be compared to graphic novels and the way in which they portray text through the visual sense. The fact that William Shakespeare and other famous authors are published again through these comics makes them a new take on classical literature, making them visual without the use of film or audio. Specifically, the works of Shakespeare were meant to be performed, and here, they are performed by cartoons. Lastly, the works are created on a computer and posted on the internet for the public to openly navigate and on which to give feedback. This allows classic works to become a part of the rapid exchange of information and become relevant again through the use of technology.

Because of its versatility, Zenpencils can be further studied in all three of these fields of research, and compared to works that are similar to it. These works include the book *Building Stories* by Chris Ware, the plethora of films that depict Shakespeare's plays, and a website called Shortlist that turns classic literature into comic books.

Technical Analysis:

The creation of every comic strip on zenpencils.com takes about a week to complete. In an article linked on the website in the 'About' section, Gavin Aung Than explains the process of creating the strips by providing each step. He first starts with an idea that he materializes through the use of photographs. He finds a photograph on the internet to represent his idea, or he photographs himself in order to attain an image that is not readily available. Than's next step is to sketch the scene onto a paper with pencil, and then follows up by scanning the image and fixing it up on Photoshop. He adds layers, stronger lines, and color to complete the rough drawings that he first created. Once he has added the text to the strip, his comics are completed.

The amount of painstaking work and attention to detail that Than needs for a single comic strip is representative of the work put into productions of Shakespearean works. Although he does not employ actors to portray the text in Shakespeare's plays, Than utilizes his hands to enhance literary art and create it a visual representation as well as an imagined experience. Every stroke of the pencil takes the place of the letters that make up the text, and the editing of the images represent the editing that once polished Shakespeare's work into the masterpieces that they are today. Zenpencils implements an ancient form of art such as sketching with lead onto a paper, but also uses the tools that technology have provided, such as Photoshop. The comic strips are not just a representation of famous works, but they are also a living example of how literature has aged and matured to become a hybrid art form that uses both old and new tools to perfect itself.

Evaluation of Research Opportunities:

Zenpencils and its array of literature excerpts and quotes redefines the graphic literature genre. With its creation, Gavin Aung Than has brought works of

art from decades, or even centuries, ago and put them on a new platform—the internet. Not only has he recreated scenes normally performed by professional actors, but he has done so with cartoon characters that also have been used for other comic strips. The major difference between other graphic literature and Zenpencils is that Than uses a blog to directly communicate with his readers/viewers and get feedback from them. This is unlike printed comic books or other graphic literature such as *Building Stories* by Chris Ware, that relies entirely on 14 printed booklets to tell a story. Than not only provides entertainment, but also creates a platform on which people can express their opinion about his work and how to improve it. He changes the genre of graphic literature by emphasizing the reader's role in the process of his work's creation.

Additionally, Than's contribution to the study of Shakespearean literature allows readers to see Shakespearean work in a different light. Besides the use of film, Shakespeare's work can only be seen played live, limiting the audience's understanding of them based entirely on the performance of the actors. Than's decision to have the visual aids to accompany the interpretation of the text is helpful to better understand it, because the words are seen as more than just dialogue between two characters. Rather than focus on a plot, Than's excerpts give more meaning to individual lines and how they can apply to every day life situations. His work gives Shakespeare and other famous authors a chance to be seen in a different light. By creating relatable images that interpret the text, Than makes classic works into recognizable scenarios for the audience. No longer are old texts difficult to understand because of their age or context. To better understand this, it would be interesting to see where the artist will take his work and what other types of literature he will use to create his comics.

Resources:

"Classic Literature Turned Into Comic Books." ShortList Magazine. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Mar. 2015.

Than, Gavin. "ZEN PENCILS." ZEN PENCILS. N.p., 10 July 2014. Web. 18 Mar. 2015.

Ware, Chris. *Building Stories*. New York: Pantheon, 2012. Print.

Summary:

Gavin Aung Than has created a blog called Zenpencils where he posts comic strips that represent famous quotes or excerpts from famous works of literature. By doing so, he puts himself not only in the field of graphic literature, but also in the field of graphic art. The work that he produces is artistic in the literary aspect and in the visual aspect, which makes the comics entertaining and educational, simultaneously. Than's use of famous texts catches the attention of his audience, while creating characters that reappear throughout his comics. The likeability of the characters relies on his ability to make them relatable, and he does so by putting them in everyday situations. As a reader, it is easy to understand the trials that the characters face and so, as a result, the texts that are represented are better understood. The fact that the comics are posted online provides a platform where

the audience can respond to them, whether it be positively, or not. This gives the artist the chance to mold his work to what the readers wish to see. By allowing the audience to purchase the comics in book form, Than has made his contribution to the graphic genre of literature more concrete.