

Critique of Erin Greene's Project

In Cyberpunk Hamlet, Erin Greene attempts to adapt the work of the immortal bard in an untraditional way. Not only is the setting changed to a “cyberpunk” world (a near-future sub-genre of science fiction, usually portraying a grim vision of a decaying world filled with technological gadgets), it is drawn in a pseudo-Japanese manga style comic book.

While the title refers to the play in its entirety, this piece deals strictly with the death of the character Ophelia. It is an unusual choice because this scene is not actually portrayed in the play. There is the famous scene where Ophelia sings a raunchy ditty and passes flowers to various other character, each having a specific symbolic meaning. After that, there is a scene when the announcement of her death by apparent suicide is made. The location is described as a lake by an old willow tree, but it is never actually seen. Choosing to depict this scene allows for more leeway than many other scenes which are already laid out.

However, while this freedom has allowed some interesting artistic choices, such as Ophelia stealing the flowers from a royal greenhouse rather than merely picking wild ones as is assumed in the play, it also robs the story of its original significance. By beginning the scene with Ophelia ripping the plants out by the roots (a far more destructive act than one would expect from this gentle character) and then progressing directly to the scene by the river (in this case, an urban floodwash), the distribution of the flowers is skipped entirely. This does leave the artist free to depict the flowers being thrown into the water (a wasteful and purposeless act, especially as we are told these are

endangered species in the cyberpunk setting) but it destroys Shakespeare's intention behind the symbolic flowers in the first place.

Similarly, Ophelia's poem as she passes out her flowers is included in a highly truncated form. In fact, what remains is nothing more than a list of the flowers Ophelia selects in the greenhouse, and nothing poetic remains. The song sung by Ophelia in the play has also been replaced, although in a somewhat haphazard fashion. A combination of American "Negro spirituals" and the modern goth band Evanescence is used. While the religious undertones of the spirituals bring greater depth to the work, they do not mesh well with the whole, especially when quoted right next to the Evanescence lyrics. The mood of that particular band suits the story, setting, and character very well, but again, they do not seem to be very well incorporated.

Of course, when discussing a manga, the artwork is equally as important as the plot. Filled with technology and dark, heavy atmospheres, the cyberpunk setting is clear from the artwork. Furthermore, the design of Ophelia herself as a gothic doll is intriguing, and makes it clear that she is a fundamentally different character than Hamlet's meek and virginal Ophelia. Overall, the artist has a reasonable level of skill, although in many places sloppy or amateurish inking detracts from the effect.

The artist has a good sense of comic flow and incorporates both panels and open space well. In many cases, the artist's manga influences are clear from the construction of a page. For example, the large close-ups of the flowers seeming to float in open space across a two-page spread is clearly a shojo-style arrangement. However, as much as the artist tried to emulate Japanese manga, some aspects are simply impossible to imitate. For example, while she makes an attempt to represent the Japanese prevalence of

onomatopoeia, her representations of various sounds are neither subtle or skillful. Often over-thought, many of the spellings of the sounds do not seem particularly accurate and their incorporation in the artwork is clumsy and intrusive. Of course, part of this is because English has no accepted representations of onomatopoeia, while Japanese has many, but for the awkward placements, only the artist can be blamed.

Overall this is an interesting and enjoyable piece. Not strictly true to Shakespeare's play, it nevertheless holds true to some of the basic themes. It might, however, upset those who are more loyal to the bard's original design, especially when it comes to changing a scene as classic and well-studied as the flower scene. This dark and brooding play is particularly well suited to the cyberpunk setting, which the artist portrays well. However, some of the actual execution of this project, such as varying levels of artwork, incorporation of onomatopoeia, and awkward dialogue/lyrics hold it back from achieving it's full potential.