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Writing Project #1

Shakespeare: The Last of the Bards

Shakespeare is used in modern popular culture today for a singular reason: he is the only known bard by the layperson. Thus, for media that reaches millions of people across the United States and the world, Shakespeare is the obvious choice because of his widespread fame. There are many Shakespearean adaptations that have been taken on by Hollywood movie producers. One of the most acclaimed is *Shakespeare in Love* due to its creativity and controversy. Conversely, television uses Shakespeare as an intellectual cue for its audience. *The Simpsons* structures its show similar to Shakespearean plays and even references him in episodes. Like Shakespeare, people have already begun to mimic *The Simpsons* because of their notoriety and one man has even combined the show with the famous work, *Hamlet*. Finally, *Malcolm in the Middle* has an entire episode based on the comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which Malcolm makes into a tragedy. While Shakespeare is referenced constantly in pop culture, he is only referenced because he is the last known bard.

Just as Shakespeare "borrowed" the plots from his plays from others, modern filmmakers have made many adaptations of his works. *Shakespeare In Love* seems to have received the highest accolades from reviewers of all of the Shakespeare adaptations. *Shakespeare In Love* was nominated for seven Golden Globe Awards and serves as an insight on making Shakespeare into a man instead of a god. The filmmakers portray Shakespeare not as a plagiarizing thief, but as a man who experienced what he wrote about, while primarily weaving in the stereotypical

love story of *Romeo and Juliet*. The film stars Gwyneth Paltrow, a highly acclaimed female actress of the twentieth century, which obviously created more legitimacy for the film. While some claim the film is inaccurate, the filmmakers clearly took the liberty of filling in the gaps of Shakespeare's life to capitalize on his reputation. Filmmakers don't even need to weave their own story, but don't even have to pay royalties. Shakespeare's name and plays created an easy opportunity for filmmakers to capitalize on in the twentieth century and on.

The Simpsons have also drawn from Shakespeare. Aside from the "Shakespeare Chicken" restaurant, Homer kills Shakespeare in "Treehouse of Horror III." In the episode, Homer guns down various historic figures and when it's Shakespeare's turn, he exclaims, "Show's over Shakespeare!" (Paakkinen) Additionally, *The Simpsons* draws on Shakespearean "play breaks" by using "Itchy and Scratchy." Shakespeare used popular elements of his time such as dancing and apparitions, while Matt Groening and his writers use the mindless violence of "Itchy and Scratchy." A play adaptation of *The Simpsons* and Shakespeare, *MacHomer*, started in the mid-1990's by Rick Miller. *MacHomer* is a version of *MacBeth* in which Miller uses over fifty of the popular culture's Simpson voices. Famous lines from Shakespeare's *MacBeth* such as, "Is this a dagger which I see before me, the handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee." have been transformed into "Is this a dagger which I see before me, or a pizza? Mmmm, pizzaaa." in *MacHomer* (Paakkinen). Miller and Groening have chosen to use Shakespearean elements because it gives supposedly low, popular culture the air of high culture. It makes the show appeal to both those who take its surface humor and those who see its intellectual motifs, which in turn has experts pondering whether students will be studying *The Simpsons* as we now do Shakespeare.

The Simpsons are not the only current television show to draw on Shakespeare. *Malcolm in the Middle* was a very popular television show of late twentieth and early twenty-first century that used Shakespeare as well. In the episode entitled "High School Play," Malcolm is recruited by a high school girl to play a changeling boy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. However, when the lead character, Puck, doesn't show up for play practice, Malcolm fills in and they discover his great talent. The play teacher decides to allow him to play Puck in the play. He touches even the hardest high school students with his beautiful recitations of the play. Nonetheless, Malcolm becomes too involved with cute high school girls and becomes entangled with their elaborate gossip. When opening night comes, Malcolm attempts to utter his first line, but he is simply filled with mindless rumors. The writers of *Malcolm in the Middle* chose to use a Shakespearean work for this play to add to the authenticity of Malcolm's persona of being a child genius. Shakespeare is obviously viewed as high culture and that a younger child could fulfill the lead in a relatively obscure Shakespeare play to most of society lends itself to elevate what is believed to be Malcolm's intelligence. Upon further examination, there is a statement being made about society by the writers of this television show. They portray to the audience that the senseless gossip and evils of modern society could corrupt something as beautiful as the works of William Shakespeare. It is a classicist view that allows the viewer to reevaluate how he or she might view what is important or moral in their life. Malcolm even quotes *A Midsummer Nights Dream* exclaiming, "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" upon realizing his folly in becoming corrupt and failing to show others his truly inspiring talents. The audience simply writes Malcolm off as an ordinary failure because of his lack of performance in a great Shakespearean work. However, as his parents, family, friends, and cast leave, Malcolm's head clears and he recites all of his

lines while still hanging from the ceiling, redeeming his folly and reassuring the viewer that Malcolm is indeed still a prodigy.

Shakespeare is found so often in popular culture simply because of his notoriety. Filmmakers can make the easiest money making Shakespeare films because of his fame and because the movies practically write themselves and are simply poorly derived adaptations. Television, however, has taken a different stance on Shakespeare. Television writers have chosen Shakespeare as an intellectual indicator. Matt Groening and the writers of *The Simpsons* have chosen to make a statement by way of structure to make themselves comparable to the great Shakespeare. The writers of *Malcolm in the Middle* have used Shakespeare to aid their plot of the central character being a true intellectual. However, in doing so, they have also made a statement about modern society being able to corrupt the beauty of Shakespeare. Shakespeare has essentially become an easy way to monetarily capitalize for writers of today. Due to his parallel to intellectualism, his fame will continue on because he is the last of the bards.

Works Cited

Malcolm in the Middle. 2006. 24 Feb. 2006 <<http://www.fox.com/malcolm/journal/25.htm>>.

Paakinen, Jouni. *A Tale Told by an Idiot*. 2001. 24 Feb. 2006
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