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“Steven Bochco could kick Shakespeare’s ass” *The Simpsons’* attack on the Shakespeare myth

doi: 10.7358/ling-2014-001-mont

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to describe the ways in which the Shakespeare myth is dealt with by *The Simpsons*, the worldwide successful American sit-com which since 1990 has depicted and reflected upon contemporary society, including its relation to and the institutionalization of literary canons, such as the Shakespearean one. It is important to underline the fact that *The Simpsons* will be considered here as a trans-medial phenomenon, that is to say including, besides the celebrated sit-com, also the *Simpsons* based adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* created and performed by Rick Miller (2002) ¹, the video games that since 1991 have featured the famous yellow skinned characters, and the comic book series, entitled *Simpsons Comics*, published by Bongo Comics Group in the United States and in Canada, but also available in numerous languages all over the world ².

The stories of *The Simpsons* revolve around the adventures of the everyday life of a stereotypical American family ³. Through them, thus, the author Matt

¹ It is a one-man vocal show. The script remains 85% Shakespeare but, thanks to the use of over 50 characters/voices from the sit-com as the characters of the tragedy, the production is hilarious (see www.machomer.com, last accessed 12/12/2013).

² There is also an animated comedy film entitled *The Simpsons Movie*, directed by David Silverman and released in 2007.

³ The parents Homer and Marge, and their three children: Lisa and Bart, both attending elementary school, and the little baby Maggie.

Groening ⁴ has been able to present burning social and political issues, famously, and sometimes notoriously, in a very challenging and desecrating way ⁵. Also Shakespeare is included in the sit-com as a subject of discussion and he – together with the academic, theatrical and marketing worlds which travel as satellites around his figure and literature – are subject to the same unorthodox treatment.

As a result, an investigation of the representation of the Shakespeare myth by *The Simpsons* seems promising. Furthermore, we can judge the subject of inquiry interesting as well, because we can assume that what one might call the *Simpsons'* Shakespeare, being an instance – and indeed a very visible and large-scale one – of the Shakespearean canon, is going to influence its reception and to play a role in the definition of “that cultural construction that will ‘count’ or be valued as authentic Shakespeare” (Kidnie 2009: 31). Finally, the results of this inter-textual relationship seem worth exploring because the correlation at stake here is between two items belonging to two different levels: to use Stuart Hall's expressions, the one of the popular forces, represented by *The Simpsons*, and the one of the power-bloc, represented by the institutionalized Shakespeare.

As discussed by Douglas Lanier in his important book *Shakespeare and popular culture*, products of popular culture, such as *The Simpsons*, provide “a shared means of expression and pleasure for those who stand outside of positions of authority” (2002: 51). Besides, Lanier explains:

popular culture is deeply contradictory. Because it consists of mass-produced commodities designed for profit, popular culture is saturated with the imperatives of capitalism. Yet because those commodities depend for their market success upon speaking to the experience of subordination, popular culture opens up spaces for measured expressions of resistance to and partial escape from that social system. (*ibid.*)

On the contrary, the Shakespeare myth is mainly a product of the hegemonic culture ⁶, although his works originally did not belong to the world of high culture and, in a sense, they do not exclusively nowadays too. In actual fact, one cannot but agree with Terence Hawkes, when he writes: “Shakespeare

⁴ The creative genius Matt Groening holds a BA degree in philosophy (The Evergreen State College, Olympia, Washington).

⁵ See, for example, Gray 2006.

⁶ The beginning of the Shakespeare myth can undoubtedly be traced back to institutional culture, suffice it to mention the English canonization of Shakespeare in the 17th and 18th century developed by scholars and actors, or the German worship of Shakespeare by the romantics who portrayed him as a *Genie*. But it is also important to highlight the fact that the Shakespeare myth has always been fed by popular culture, just think of the legends linked to Shakespeare, born during Garrick's Shakespeare Jubilee in 1769, and the marketing opportunities linked to them (see Holderness 1988 and Dobson 1992).

appears worldwide on T-shirts, postage stamps and credit cards as well as in the titles of learned monographs and Ph.D. dissertations" (1996: 1) ⁷. Similarly, answering the question of a *New York Times* journalist about whether Shakespeare is spinning in his grave for his MacHomer, Rick Miller stated:

[*MacHomer*] is quite reverent to both Shakespeare and *The Simpsons*, although people have a hard time imagining that. Shakespeare was popular culture then, and he was satirizing society, using tons of inside jokes and political references. And the characters of *The Simpsons* are profoundly human. Homer is an ass but a lovable ass. Macbeth was not that smart. It is Lady Macbeth who wears the pants in the family, just like Marge. (Miller 2012)

After a sketchy theoretical premise on the Shakespeare myth and its criticism, I will discuss the ways in which this institutionalized but all the same popular myth of the playwright is represented and treated by *The Simpsons*, where subordinated cultural impulses collide with dominant ones. I will analyze how the Shakespeare myth is de-mythologized through this popular, trans-medial, contemporary phenomenon, not to be destroyed once and for all, but more interestingly to be re-mythologized to function in our contemporary world. In the conclusion, an attempt will be made to answer the extremely complex question of whether these acts are or are not politically effective.

2. THE SHAKESPEARE MYTH

As early as 1851, the German philologist Nicolaus Delius warned the readers of his biography of William Shakespeare of the mythological dimension which informed the studies on the playwright's life (see Delius 1851: 34-5). Indeed, since Shakespeare had been co-opted to political and commercial causes, by the Nineteenth century, in England as well as in other countries, such as Germany, the descriptions of the playwright's life were not always based on historical documents, but were more often the result of the need to use the Shakespeare icon ⁸ to support a cause or to sell a product. The same Nicolaus Delius, was the actor, together with his contemporary colleagues, of another form of mythologizing Shakespeare: depicting him as a sort of literary God and building a sort of 'religion' of Shakespeare, happily named "bardolatry". This definition sounds convincing if one thinks of the number-

⁷ On the numberless "Shakespeares" of popular culture see Burt 1999 and 2007.

⁸ According to some scholars, today one cannot speak of William Shakespeare as an icon, because the playwright lost his previous iconic status.

less festivals organized for Shakespeare Jubilees globally (since 1769), comparable to Catholic Jubilees, or to the odes composed in honour of Shakespeare, comparable to prayers ⁹.

The pioneering warning made by Nicolaus Delius in the 19th century was thoroughly defined only about one hundred years later. In 1964 this form of mythologizing Shakespeare was attacked by Alfred Harbage, who started investigating “the effect of *mythos* upon [...] Shakespeare criticism” (1966: 25), expressing his worries about them. Some twenty years later, John Drakakis, introducing the challenging collection of essays entitled *Alternative Shakespeares*, wrote: “[T]he common objective is the *demystification* of the ‘myth’ of Shakespeare” (1985: 24, my emphasis). The authors demonstrated that the assumption of the timelessness of Shakespeare’s plays is inconsistent. More precisely, it is the effect (and not the cause) of the innumerable practices of appropriation to which they have undergone along the centuries and along different cultures. Drakakis rightly defines them as “ideological” processes of “reconstruction”, which shape, or better re-shape, Shakespeare’s plays as “manifestations of high culture” (1985: 4).

In 1988 Graham Holderness edited the famous collection of essays by different authors called *The Shakespeare Myth*, in which Shakespeare was studied as a “cultural phenomenon” (*ibid.*: xv), functioning and acting in the modern world independently of the *original* Shakespeare. This book was hailed as the beginning of “a Shakespeare Myth school of criticism” (Holderness 2001: xi). A critical point of view which differs from the *traditional* one adopted in the field of Shakespearean studies, in that it is not interested in the Elizabethan dramatist as a historical figure, neither in the supposed authorial intentions of his works, nor in their historical contexts, or in their aesthetic features. On the contrary, this kind of criticism is interested in the function played by the *discourse of Shakespeare* in contemporary culture.

Since then, it has been powerfully demonstrated that the investigation in the historically based Shakespeare myth is interesting and rewarding. In the 1990s many books were published in which Shakespeare was studied not as the untouchable Bard of the Elizabethan time, but as a contemporary pop idol, comparable to The Beatles, linked to the same marketing and economic systems to which a brand-name, such as Coca-Cola, is linked (see, among

⁹ The Shakespeare Jubilee festival was held for the first time in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1769, thanks to David Garrick’s initiative. As Deelman writes: “The importance of the Jubilee in the history of Shakespeare’s reputation can hardly be exaggerated. It marks the point at which Shakespeare stopped being regarded as an increasingly popular and admirable dramatist, and became a god” (1964: 7). On this topic see also Dávidházi (1998) and Ascari (2005: 177-183). Another good example of bardolatry is the ode composed in German by Max Vogrich, on the occasion of the inauguration of the Shakespeare monument in Weimar, in 1904 (see Engler 2003).

others, Bristol 1990, 1996, Hodgon 1998, Lanier 2002 and 2007). In the last two decades, scholars have also reflected upon the consequences of the Shakespeare myth as a global phenomenon:

Has Shakespeare become one of the global icons through which local cultural markets are progressively Westernized? Is the dream (or the threat) of a technologically linked, equalizing, worldwide culture for the global village and of a super-cultural, universally enjoyable and consumable Shakespeare imposing Western values over other cultural traditions and economies? (Massai 2005: 4)

As Hugh Grady concluded on the occasion of a speech given during a recent conference seminar on contemporary attempts at demythologizing Shakespeare, instead of debunking Shakespeare, "in the end, perhaps paradoxically, the critique of the Shakespeare myth [in the 20th century] amounted to revitalizing and updating the image of the Bard for the 21st century"¹⁰. The same could be said of the artistic attacks, as it were, on Shakespearean plays, mounted by unorthodox playwrights such as Bertolt Brecht and Heiner Müller. In short, every assault seems doomed to be absorbed and neutralized by the extremely complex cultural network represented by the Shakespeare myth.

Thus, the Shakespeare myth is a multifaceted, contemporary social phenomenon, apparently impregnable and boundless. It includes the unconditional homage to the aesthetic perfection of Shakespeare works, the globalized iconicity of his figure and of his literature used for marketing ends and also as a cultural status symbol, and the defence of the institutionalized and text-centred 'original Shakespeare' of schools and theatres. All these aspects are featured and attacked in the stories of *The Simpsons*, as will be better illustrated in the following paragraph.

3. RIDICULING THE SHAKESPEARE MYTH

Using a kind of comedy of evil (see Spivack 1978)¹¹, the Shakespeare myth and its supporters are mocked in *The Simpsons*. First of all, the Shakespeare myth in the cartoon takes the form of an overwhelming presence, echoing, in

¹⁰ Handout, ESRA Shakespeare Conference "Shakespeare and Myth," Montpellier, 26-29 June, 2013. Seminar "The Shakespeare Myth Reloaded: Demythologizing and Re-mythologizing Shakespeare Today" (convenors: Zeno Ackermann and Zoltán Márkus).

¹¹ I.e. the time-honoured technique, dating back to English medieval drama, consisting of laughing at the morally bad characters, in order to warn the audience against them and their negative behaviour.

a parodied way, what Harold Bloom identified in artistic productions as *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). In *The Simpsons*, the all-encompassing influence of Shakespeare in English literature and culture is indeed represented as a linguistic presence or, more interestingly, as a zombie hunting the world or as a ghost living his afterlife in Heaven¹².

The name of the English playwright has been present since the second episode of the series (but the first regular one), entitled “Bard the Genius” (2, 2, 1990). It appears as “Shakespeare I-XV”, in the spine of a volume which is on the bookshelf of the rich library of a school for gifted children, which Bart happens to attend after secretly swapping his IQ test with that of his brilliant school-mate Martin Price. Once Bart is asked to choose a book among the many on the bookcase, he takes a cartoon, to the embarrassment of the teacher, who tries to persuade Bart to choose something else (there are Dante’s *Inferno*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and many others), while snatching the cartoon out of his hands, wondering how it could happen that a cartoon was there. The situation satirizes the unjust but widespread attitude of teachers and academics alike towards what belongs to pop-culture, such as cartoons, commonly considered the small-*c* culture that must be subordinated to the big-*C* culture. Moreover, it clearly highlights the cultural value of Shakespeare as symbol of sophistication, gravity and, in the end, snobbishness.

The cases in which Shakespeare is shown as a character in the very form of a ghost are mainly the special episodes made for the Halloween series. They are called “Treehouse of Horror” and distinguished by a Roman number. In “Treehouse of Horror XIX” (4, 20, 2008), Shakespeare appears in “Celebrity Heaven”, where he and many other pop-cultural celebrities, such as John Lennon, are revolting against the unpaid exploitation of their

¹² It is interesting to note that the representations of Shakespeare as a ghost are numerous and rooted in the past, although their function was a consecrating and not a desecrating one. An interesting example is given by the German scholar and playwright Johann Friedrich Schink who, in 1780, reflected upon the theme of theatrical adaptation through his *Vorbereitungsspiel* titled *Shakespeare in der Klemme, oder Wir wollen doch auch den Hamlet spielen* – a comic introduction to his adaptation of *Hamlet* – which figured Shakespeare in Elysium, together with Garrick, with whom he made friends, and with Ducis, whom instead he could not stand. On the fictional representations of Shakespeare as a spirit in the after-world see Hoenselaars (2006). On this topic see also Zacchi (2008). In her essay the scholar illustrates how “[t]he entrance of the Ghost of Shakespeare in the late seventeenth-century adaptations, evoked first as a name, then as a character embodied in an actor’s voice and gesture, and finally invoked as an authority, traces the path for the canonization of Shakespeare’s corpus.” (Zacchi 2008: 12). Moreover, it seems stimulating to think about the parallelism between the role of Shakespeare’s ghost in *The Simpsons* and the role of ghosts in Shakespeare’s plays such as *Hamlet* or *Julius Caesar*: according to some scholars, Shakespearean ghosts stand for the cultural memory of the past, for the return of the suppressed memory not only of an individual, but of a society (see Pennacchia Punzi 2012: 53-61). On the hypo/hypermnestic expressions of dramatic memory in Tudor’s plays see Mullini 1988.

image. This funny idea acutely mirrors the criticism of the Shakespeare myth described above in this essay, mainly Michael Bristol's idea, when he states that "Shakespeare is big-time in the idiomatic sense of cultural success and widespread notoriety. Not only has he achieved canonical status, Shakespeare is a contemporary celebrity" (1996, blurb).

These spirits are all completely white, with the exception of their heads, still yellow (as those of all the other characters of the sit-com), and mirror their globally known icons. Shakespeare wears a Renaissance suit and John Lennon is on board the famed yellow submarine. The plot of this episode revolves around a group of managers who do not want to pay VIP image rights and thus convince Homer to kill some celebrities, because, as they say, he seems to be talented for this kind of 'job'. Indeed, reversing Harold Bloom's reflections, Homer becomes the anxiety avenger of our culture. To corroborate this idea, one can mention a previous Halloween episode: "Treehouse of Horror III" (5, 4, 1992). Here, Shakespeare is a zombie who together with the zombies of the American President Washington and of Albert Einstein is walking through the corridors of Bart and Lisa's elementary school, in the proximity of the library. Homer shoots the playwright, saying the typical sentence of horror films: "Show's over Shakespeare". The Bard falls down, and with his head turned to the audience asks himself: "Is this the end of Zombie Shakespeare?".

Again in the form of a ghost, William Shakespeare appears in *The Simpsons Game*, at the start of the final level, set in Heaven. This is very interesting to support the thesis of this paper: Heaven is clearly Elysium, i.e. the literary and artistic canon. Shakespeare, in the form of a minor boss, is the satirical icon of the Shakespeare myth and its supporters: he himself opposes the Simpsons entry into heaven by throwing skulls – which remind us of Yorick's skull, i.e. the skull of a king's jester – at them¹³. The ghost of Shakespeare becomes the emblem of conservative people, who confine Shakespeare to the ivory tower of elite culture, and are blind to the value of contemporary pop-culture as well as to the commercial side of Shakespearean theatre¹⁴. These people are well represented in the sit-com by the character of Sideshow Bob who works in the field of television and is a (self-proclaimed) cultivated man. Eventually in the series, he becomes a criminal and is imprisoned. It is also interesting to mention the fact that in one of the sit-com episodes the same character has been associ-

¹³ [http://villains.wikia.com/wiki/William_Shakespeare_\(The_Simpsons\)](http://villains.wikia.com/wiki/William_Shakespeare_(The_Simpsons)) (last accessed 23/03/2013).

¹⁴ On the topic of the popularity and of the commercial value of Shakespeare's plays see Aaron 2012. Although it is incorrect to compare Renaissance theatre audience with today's audience of pop cultural media, such as television, without making any specification, the fact that there are many points in common is self explanatory. The first book to explore the mutual relationship between Shakespeare and popular culture, between the end of the 16th century till the beginning of Shakespeare's 'afterlife' in the 18th century, is quite recent: *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Popular Culture* (2006).

ated with the cruel aristocratic and anti-democratic Shakespearean character of Coriolanus, the Roman general who hated the people of Rome.

The allusion is, more precisely, to the idea stated in the play that one tends to inherit the character from one's own father. In the play this point is made by Volumnia, the general's mother, just after her friend Valeria has described her how young Marcius, the general's son, raged against a beautiful butterfly and destroyed it, without any explicable reason. The episode is so telling for the story, that it appears on the cover of the Arden Edition of the play (see Brockbank 1976). In *The Italian Bob* (17, 8, 2005), Gino, Sideshow Bob's son, is introduced to the audience of *The Simpsons*. He was born in the Italian village of Salsiccia (the Italian for sausage meat) to a beautiful Italian woman called Francesca¹⁵. He looks like and speaks like his father. He also shares his father's cruel and criminal character. In the episode, Gino, together with his mother, helps Bob to try to kill the Simpsons, while they are visiting Rome. In the end, the Simpsons are saved by the clown Krusty, and Gino, out of rage, chases a butterfly within the ruined walls of the Coliseum. The allusion to the Shakespearean Roman drama is clear.

Besides subtly criticizing the Shakespeare myth and the Bard's supporters, *The Simpsons* present very explicit and direct attacks on them. In one episode ("Tales of Public Domain" – *Do The Bard, Man*, 14.13.2002), for example, Homer introduces one of the greatest plays by the English playwright – which is going to be parodied – telling its name and author, "*Hamlet* by William Shakespeare". Immediately after, the *sacred* work is exposed to the words of the irreverent Bart, who states: "Dad, these old stories can't compare with our modern super writers. Steven Bochco¹⁶ could kick Shakespeare's ass". On the one hand, through this meta-literary wisecrack, Bart indirectly hints at a parallelism between today's television writing and Renaissance theatre writing. On the other hand, as it is often the case when Shakespeare is referred to in television (Lanier 2012), the English playwright is depicted as belonging to a world far from the popular one of television, that is to say the old-fashioned and static world of elitist culture. Shakespeare is indeed defined as being inferior to contemporary screenwriters, an author of old stories, which is characterized by the fact of being extremely boring. Thus, one can state that, in this case, to be attacked is the myth of Shakespeare as the icon of highbrow, by now antiquated, culture (see Montironi 2012).

Bart is, nonetheless, persuaded to listen to the Shakespearean tale contained in the children's storybook by his sister Lisa, who tells him that

¹⁵ Voiced by the famous Italian actress Maria Grazia Cucinotta (guest star for the episode).

¹⁶ Steven Bochco (born 1943) is an American television producer and writer, author of great TV hits, which include *L.A. Law* and *NYPD Blue*.

Hamlet begins with the murder of the protagonist's father, thus translating the tragedy into a sort of thriller, an appealing genre for a contemporary young boy. The play is reduced to a five-minute parody, where Bart plays the title-role, thus creating a telling parallelism between Hamlet and present-day young men¹⁷. Of the original plot only three main moments remain: in the first one Hamlet's father's spirit asks his son to avenge his murder, in the second one the protagonist knows about his uncle's guilt through the 'Mouse-trap play', in the third one Hamlet/Bart finally avenges his father. The great and memorable soliloquies of the play are either cut down or ironically represented. The irony is not meant as much to ridicule this popular Elizabethan dramatic technique, but rather to deride the traditional way of performing it, which is obsolete by now. After the story is told Bart is bored and only becomes enthusiastic again when his father tells him the play inspired the film *Ghostbusters*, and the whole family starts dancing the cognate theme music. It can be inferred that, from the point of view of contemporary popular culture – the one personified by Bart –, Shakespearean plays can be fully enjoyed only to the extent in which they are rewritten, translated into modern everyday language, transposed into new media, and even thoroughly transformed, to meet the need of a contemporary, wide audience. This seems a clever strategy, indeed Rick Miller declared that the most important effect of his extremely loved Simpsonsian parody of *Macbeth* is that it "opens up Shakespeare to a lot of people who would otherwise never give it a chance" (McHug 2003).

Another interesting Simpsonsian case in which the Shakespeare myth is called into question and laughed about is the part called "Lady Macbeth" in the episode "Four Great Women and a Manicure" (20, 20, 2009). In this story, Homer and Marge are no more the father and mother of a contemporary family, but play different roles. They both work in a theatre company, currently producing Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. From this meta-theatrical perspective, *The Simpsons* provide a contemporary reading of the Shakespearean play¹⁸. Marge is very ambitious, yet she is the troupe's washer woman and her husband Homer is a humble actor with a ridiculous part in the production: one of the trees in the forest. Thus she pushes Homer to kill other actors, in order for him to gain the title role and to be judged as the best actor. Marge/Lady Macbeth is finally killed by her sense of guilt, since she is haunted by the spirits of all the people she made Homer kill. In the end, Homer is alone on the troupe's stage and his wife proclaims he is now the one and only actor

¹⁷ The title of the parody, *Do the Bard Man*, includes a pun with the name of Bart and the term 'Bard', frequently used to refer to Shakespeare in a celebratory way.

¹⁸ For a clever analysis see Antinora 2010.

who can play the protagonist's role in all the plays written by the playwright, but Homer, overwhelmed by the idea of reading more Shakespeare, commits suicide. Homer's final desperate act due to an "overdose of Shakespeare" is a desecrating expression towards the playwright. But one must also consider that, through this episode *The Simpsons* actually contributed to the complex process of playing and reviving Shakespeare today.

Very often portrayed and spoofed by *The Simpsons* are bardolatry and the cognate Shakespeare trade – as Barbara Hodgson successfully defined the mutual relationship between the English playwright and the field of marketing. First of all, the exploitation of the marketing power of Shakespeare themed items is alluded to in some episode titles which echo Shakespearean titles, such as "Much Apu About Nothing" (23, 7, 1996), where Apu, the sit-com's Indian market owner's name replaces the noun Ado; "Rome-Old and Julie-Eh" (15, 18, 2007), a pun ¹⁹ based on the plot of the episode, which revolves around the contrasted love story between an old man, Homer's father, and a younger woman, Marge's sister; and "A Midsummer's Nice Dream" (22, 16, 2011), which shows a triple plot, as does the Shakespearean *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Numberless examples of the same kind come from one of the *Simpsons Comics* entitled "Much Ado About Comics. The Simpsons Shake-up Shakespeare! Bard Boiled" (76, 2002) ²⁰: the ending shows Bart, Lisa and some of their schoolmates eating huge ice cream cups in an ice cream parlour named "As you lick it!". This is a very funny representation of the common use of the Shakespeare myth for brand naming or simply for advertising products, and it is very interesting because it is the conclusion of a story in which the object of parody is bardolatry, in the form of the veneration for the text-centered, institutionalized Shakespeare ²¹. Indeed, the children stole the money to buy their ice creams from their parents' wallets and those of the other people among the audience, because all of them fall asleep during their Shakespearean show, *Troilus and Cressida*, organised by Springfield Elementary School. At the beginning of the show, Bart does not pronounce the exact lines since he wants to do "A LITTLE IMPROVE TO LIGHTEN THINGS UP", and thus Lisa reprimands him sharply stating: "I THINK SHAKESPEARE IS JUST FINE ON ITS OWN. DO IT RIGHT, OR WE'LL START THE WHOLE PLAY OVER AGAIN". This is a very interesting speech which

¹⁹ As it is well known, puns characterize the language of Shakespeare's plays and, to the end of this paper, it seems important to observe that puns are also at the basis of *The Simpsons'* humour.

²⁰ The title itself is an example of desecrating parody. Interestingly enough, the number was reprinted in 2010, together with other stories, under the name *Simpsons Comics* "Get Some Fancy Book Learnin'" (the cover page features a fearful Homer reading *The Complete Works Of Shakespeare*).

²¹ On this point see Lanier 2012.

funnily echoes the sempiternal battle between the upholders of the need to rewrite Shakespeare's plays and the upholders of the need to preserve them in their original form.

The audience is with Bart and finds the play boring. At the end of the performance everybody is sleeping, apparently except for Homer, who actually is no exception: he just learned a technique to sleep with his eyes open, as we know from the front cover of a book he is holding on his knees. Homer did fall asleep and, while sleeping, he dreamt of his own Shakespearean production: an interpretation of many Shakespearean plays (*Antony and Cleopatra*, *Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Richard III*, *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear*) – maybe an allusion to the lost film *Le rêve de Shakespeare ou La Mort de Jules César* (1907), by Georges Méliès, precursor of the first Shakespearean film: *Julius Caesar* (1908) by William Ranous –, all interpreted in costumes by the yellow skinned characters of the sitcom, but with strong anachronistic references to our contemporary society and with outrageous changes to the plots. Just to give a few examples: Antony (Skinner, principal of Springfield Elementary School) and Cleopatra (Mrs. Krabappel, one of the teachers of Springfield Elementary School, in the sitcom engaged in a troubled relationship with her superior) are portrayed during a counseling session, held by a man who really looks like Sigmund Freud; whereas Julius Caesar (Mr. Burns, the rich and cruel owner of Springfield nuclear power plant) comes out unscathed from more than one attempt on his life, twice because he ducks to pick up a coin with his face on it, which is on the ground, and in the end he survives the final conspiracy because, in the confusion of the moment, the conspirators stab each other instead of stabbing him. The merciless *Titus Andronicus* takes the form of the silent animated cartoon of the sitcom titled "Itchy & Scratchy", revolving around the bloody and cruel stories of the homonymous mouse and cat. Although their adventures are normally brutal and very gory, the plot of this Shakespearean play shocks them, to the extent that they declare: "YOU KNOW ITCHY, I LIKE VIOLENCE [...], BUT WHOEVER WROTE THIS IS REALLY **MESSED UP**" "WORD". This funny punchline is doubly meaningful. First of all, it is a humorous reference to the psychoanalytic attempts to describe the plays of Shakespeare and also the mind who wrote them. Furthermore, Shakespeare is negatively defined, and his status as master of dramatic literature is attacked – as is many times the case in this comic, suffice it to mention that the playwright appears as a garden gnome in the Capulets' garden, on which a rude Romeo (the bully Nelson of the sit-com) ²² stubs his toes, railing against it.

²² It is the juxtaposition of the Shakespearean characters with the Simpsonsian ones to revivify the reception of the Renaissance works and make them meaningful for contemporary audience.

Bardolatry is spoofed also in the sit-com episode entitled “Moonshine River” (1, season 24, 30 September 2012), the one in which the family travels to New York because Bart wants to meet again his ex-girlfriend Mary, who lives there. While Homer accompanies Bart in this venture, Marge and Lisa prefer visiting the city and experiencing the cultural life it offers. More precisely they want to go to a Broadway show, but their money is not enough to buy the tickets. Thus, they decide to go to Delacorte Theatre, because that night the famous “Shakespeare in the Park” is taking place. The performance is free, but they need to queue in a long line till sunset, in order to get seats. Once there, ready to enjoy the show, a man announces the performance has been cancelled, because the actors playing the roles of the two contending families in the play, the Capulets and the Montagues, argued with each other. They are the professional Baldwin family and the Sheen/ Estevez family respectively. At this point Lisa gives an example of bardolatry. Indeed, she does not resign herself to miss the Shakespearean performance and turns director, trying to hire actors from amongst the audience. The show will be a reading of the play. The situation is desperate, suffice it to mention the fact that the only professional actor she is able to involve in her production suffers from stage fright. Despite all this, the play is read till the end. Eventually, the police arrives to inquire about what happened and a fireman sprays the devotees of Shakespeare crammed into the Park, including Marge and Lisa, with a hose. The attempt to homage Shakespeare is clearly spoofed, but the parody has been rightly interpreted as consecration by the people directly involved in it. In a review one reads:

If it's true you haven't made it until *The Simpsons* parodies you, then The Public Theater's iconic Shakespeare in the Park series finally hit it big on Sunday, September 30, during the long-running animated series' season premiere. In an episode that transplanted the Springfield, Non-Specific State family to New York City, blue haired mother Marge and smartypants daughter Lisa sought out budget “culture” to validate their urban trip. Which inevitably led them to Shakespeare in the Park, the summertime series theater non-animated geeks wait for all year. [...] After all, who wouldn't want to be inducted into the pop culture Hall of Fame? ²³

Although parody can be consecrating, as the journalist suggests in her article, the reverential attitude towards Shakespeare outlined in the account of the famous Shakespeare in the Park appears as ludicrous. What are then the consequences of these two-coloured acts of reception? Do they have an impact on the institution of the Shakespeare myth? An answer can only be suggested.

²³ http://www.theatermania.com/new-york-city-theater/news/10-2012/shakespeare-in-the-park-stars-on-the-simpsons_63026.html (last accessed 23/03/2013).

CONCLUSIONS

As it has been illustrated, the parody of the Shakespeare myth made by *The Simpsons* on the one hand tends to desecrate the figure of Shakespeare, but on the other it seems to consecrate it in a new form for contemporary audience. What is, then, the effect of this 'anarchic' appropriation in the institutionalized reception of Shakespeare? I shall try to hint at a possible answer to this difficult question recalling a case that attracted the attention of the media and public opinion, about four years ago. In 2010, Joseph Reynolds, father of a 13-year-old daughter, got up a petition against his daughter's school (Kingsmead School, Somerset UK), because the time required by the teacher for the analysis of the opening scene of *The Simpsons* prevented the class from doing the planned reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ²⁴. The reply of school authorities, politicians and media alike was against the reaction of this father, which was seen as exaggerated. The man was also invited to consider the usefulness of *The Simpsons* to learn important narrative devices and the analysis of media-texts. What does it mean? Did *The Simpsons* really destroy the Shakespeare myth? Or did they eventually take its place?

One must take note of the fact that, in this 'cultural battle', the common opinion did not stand up for Shakespeare, at least the majority of it. Evidently, the playwright's status has changed, although it continues to be central. A good starting point to analyze this complex phenomenon of reception may be a book written in 2010 by Waltonen and Du Vernay, boldly and eloquently entitled *The Simpsons in the classroom*. In this unconventional book it is precisely Shakespeare, the symbol of the canon of English literature, who is being used as a way to legitimize the school study of the cartoon, which is, instead, an un-canonized cultural expression. In the chapter devoted to the development of critical thinking, one reads:

Teaching critical thinking and analysis through a familiar medium is not 'dumbing down' the curriculum, [...] but rather it serves as an exercise in having analytical skills, preparing students to apply these skills to the humanities, and writing through the lens of these new insights. *Suddenly, Shakespeare isn't as intimidating as he used to be.* (Waltonen and Du Vernay 2010: 112, my emphasis)

This last sentence is most important because it perfectly outlines the current reception of the Shakespeare myth. Even in institutional places, what Brecht (1954) called the *intimidating effect* of classics such as Shakespeare, i.e. the orthodox attitude towards the works belonging to the canon, is enfeebled.

²⁴ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1295062/Angry-parents-accuse-school-dumbing-English-showing-The-Simpsons-class.html> (last accessed 23/03/2013).

In conclusion, the Simpsean attack on the Shakespeare myth is outrageously radical and anarchic, but it also offers a dialectic and fruitful comparison with both the phenomenon of the Shakespeare myth and with Shakespeare's plays. It is difficult to determine the consequences of all this in the reception of the English playwright. From my point of view, it will certainly contribute to shape the common idea of what Shakespeare is. Indeed, *The Simpsons'* attack on Shakespeare successfully works against the unconditional worship of the devotees of the Bard and against the obsolete and elitist reception of his plays. Moreover it provides a new reading of his canon, which restores the original popular dimension of Shakespeare's works, and shows how they can still be functional and meaningful today.

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at describing the ways in which the Shakespeare myth is dealt with by *The Simpsons*, the worldwide successful American sit-com which since 1990 has depicted and reflected upon contemporary society, including its relation to and the institutionalization of literary canons, such as the Shakespearean one. In this investigation, *The Simpsons* will be considered as a trans-medial phenomenon, including, besides the celebrated sit-com, also the *Simpsons* based adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* created and performed by Rick Miller (2002), the video games that feature the famous yellow-skinned characters, and the comic book series entitled *Simpsons Comics*. After a brief theoretical introduction, this paper will illustrate how the Shakespeare myth is de-mythologized through *The Simpsons*, to be re-mythologized so as to function and be meaningful in our contemporary world. In the conclusion, an attempt will be made to answer the extremely complex question about the political effectiveness of these acts.