



Università  
Ca' Foscari  
Venezia

Master's Degree programme  
in European, American and Postcolonial  
Languages and Literatures  
(D.M. 270/2004)

Final Thesis

**Gaiman, Shakespeare and  
the Question of Authorship**

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Matriculation number 872035

**Academic Year**

2019 / 2020

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## NOTE ON THE TEXT

All the quotations from the Shakespearean plays inside this dissertation are taken from the following editions:

- Shakespeare, W. (2008). *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shakespeare, W. (2008). *The Tempest*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

In the text, they will be quoted with act, scene and verse.

# INTRODUCTION

Through the centuries, in literature, the question of authorship has always held a central yet peculiar place. The relationship between authors and their literary work has always been complicated, especially because it does not revolve exclusively around these two elements. In fact, three separate aspects must be taken into account: the writer, the voice of the narrator inside the work and the public reception of that specific work. From the second half of the twentieth century, literary critics have debated upon the very concept of the author, some of them considering it “dead”, as Barthes (1967, 142) declared, in order for the reader to move to the centre of critical attention and others following Foucault, who problematised the idea of the author and created the “author-function” (1969, 305). In any case, the meeting point of these criticisms was that the writer was just a gateway for external influences (mostly the historical, cultural, economic and social context she or he lived in) and the literary work ought to be considered separately from its creator, thus creating a gap between the two.

Neil Gaiman tackles that gap and uses it in order to create a brand-new character out of a very well-known real-life (if dead) author: William Shakespeare himself. Playing with the little information there is on his life, Gaiman moulds Shakespeare the writer into Shakespeare the character in his graphic novel, *The Sandman*. Through the Bard, Gaiman tries to untangle the increasingly complicated feelings he has towards his work: *The Sandman* brought him under the public spotlight, but along with that came all the problems of fame. After Stephen King gave him the advice of enjoying what he was working on, Gaiman became overly anxious about it instead: “I worried about the next deadline, the next idea, the next story. There wasn’t a moment for the next fourteen or fifteen years that I wasn’t writing something

in my head, or wondering about it. And I didn't stop and look around and go, *This is really fun.*" (Gaiman, 2016, 494) Hence, inside the graphic novel, the reader can detect this increasing concern through Shakespeare's character, portrayed as a writer at the beginning of his career. He is presented in issue 12 of *A Doll's House, Men of Good Fortune*, while he is speaking to a young Kit Marlowe at the peak of his success, but then Gaiman dedicated another two issues entirely to his plays. Issue 19, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and issue 75, *The Tempest*, which is also the closing chapter of the whole series, are not only a retelling of Shakespeare's plays but also provide an insight into the fictional life of the greatest author of all time. By the end of the series, Shakespeare appears to be consumed by the life he led (or did not lead, to be more accurate), constantly torn between what is real and what is imaginary, between the world inside his head and the one outside it.

The outcome of Gaiman's operation of adaptation is then twofold: on one hand, he takes Shakespeare as an inspiration, paying his homage through the reworking of his plays, but on the other he also manages to humanise him, to claim him back to his own world, making the Bard step away from that high shelf where the literary canon and criticism have confined him.

When it comes to adaptations, and particularly Shakespearean ones, two different problems arise. The first concerns the Western idea of Shakespeare as untouchable, the Zeus in the Olympus of writers, representing lofty English literature as a whole: he "is rarely presented as simply a writer. Rather he is shaped and interpreted by cultural forces, so he is always modern but always eternal." (Castaldo, 2004, 95) The second issue focuses on the problem of originality. As a matter of fact, Sanders claims that "Shakespeare was himself an adapter and an imitator, an appropriator of myth, fairy tale, folklore, the historical chronicles of Holinshed, and the prose fiction and poetry of his day, as well as classical text by Ovid and Plutarch."

(2016, 59) Therefore, the allegedly original source (Shakespeare in this particular instance) is actually a patchwork of pre-existing literature. The issue of originality then shifts from the adapter to the adapted, focusing on the idea of what “original” literature means, both as something completely new that stands out on its own and as something that gives origin to something else entirely. But is it possible to imagine a literary work without its literary predecessors?

Gottschall refers to the humankind as “*homo fictus*” (2012, xiv), differentiating it from the *homo sapiens sapiens* as a superior ape. According to his view, human beings are storytelling animals: it is impossible to think of people without inscribing their life into a narration. “[...] Story is for a human as water is for a fish – all-encompassing and not quite palpable.” (Gottschall, 2012, xiv) Each personal narrative is inevitably tied up with all the others that came across it, whether these belong to the real world or the imaginative one. As a matter of fact, the story of each person is a literary story: human beings read the world, and through that they perceive selected pieces of information from reality and eventually reassemble them together into a tale that makes sense for them. Therefore, humans are inscribed into a continuum of literature, a never-ending stream of narrative that will adjust to its present background with the unravelling of time. Thus, if literature is a-temporal, its story turns into a story of continuous adaptations and appropriations of prior literary works, creating a labyrinth of connections between them that runs through the centuries. In literary theory, the concept of intertextuality describes exactly the links a text establishes with other texts, thus considering it not as a closed, self-sufficient system but rather as co-dependent from the external structure of prior literary tradition. (Kristeva in Still and Worton, 1990, 1) Genette instead uses the term “transtextuality” (1997, 1) to refer to “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts.” (Genette, 1997, 1)

This thesis aims to analyse the complex question of authorship in adaptations in an “unconventional” medium, the graphic novel, considering Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman* and his reworking of Shakespeare’s plays in order to show the difficult and not-at-all straightforward relationship between an author, his readership and his work.

The first chapter serves as a theoretical introduction to the writers. After a brief summary of Gaiman’s personal and professional life, also describing his writing, the second paragraph analyses briefly adaptations from a theoretical point of view, moving to the way in which Shakespearean adaptations have modified his public perception, and concluding with an analysis of adaptations specifically addressed to a young adult audience. The last part focuses on the graphic novel, introducing this fairly recently developed means of communication with a description of its main characteristics. It then proceeds to a description of the history of the rise of the graphic novel, underlying its importance as an in-between land, where words and images interlace, as the former always interferes with the latter and vice versa.

The second section revolves around *The Sandman* presenting the story of Dream (also known as Morpheus, Oneiros, or under other names), king of the realm of Dreaming, as it occurs through the 75 issues of the graphic novel. Furthermore, it analyses the family of the Endless, composed of seven different identities which are personified representations of some intrinsic human characteristics: Dream, Death, Desire, Destiny, Delirium (formerly Delight), Despair and Destruction. Gaiman recreates a mythological pantheon of beings even more powerful than gods, and gives each one of them a specific function, depth and personality. The chapter investigates Gaiman’s view of mythology and gods as subject to decline, oblivion and eventually death. It then presents a comparison of *A Midsummer Night’s*



*Dream*, issue 19, and *The Tempest*, issue 75, both in their original Shakespearean form and as they appear in Gaiman's adaptation.

"If Sandman was about one thing, it was about the act of storytelling, and the, possibly, redemptive nature of stories. But then, it's hard for a two-thousand-page story to be about just one thing." When Gaiman (2016, 58) describes his own first DC graphic novel, he focuses on the power of stories and their reception. As aforementioned, literature is a web human beings are inevitably tangled up in. Thus, the third chapter considers the problems of being a writer, a creator of actual literature, as Gaiman addresses them in *The Sandman*. It opens with an analysis on postmodernism and the postmodernist tools Gaiman uses inside his graphic novel: the deconstruction of mythology; his conception of storytelling, explored through metafiction; and his literary worldbuilding. The second paragraph examines both Dream and Shakespeare's characters, as the author removes from the Shakespearean myth all the superstructures imposed by critics over the centuries in order to bring the Bard back to a human level of empathy and understanding. This last part is devoted to the question of authorship and the relationship between a writer and his characters. Gaiman more than once declared: "I tend to write about things from wherever I am standing, and that means I include too much me in the things I write." (2016, xvii) It is evident in the graphic novel: Dream is nonetheless a literary parallel to Gaiman, as much as Shakespeare represents a human parallel to Dream. The literary copies of the author discover "through [their] life and the course of the series the necessary loss tied to a life [spent] bringing dreams to life." (Castaldo, 2004, 99) Eventually, at the end of the series, all three are set free from the burden of words: Shakespeare completes his last play and will write no more, Dream dies to be reborn as a new self and Gaiman takes his leave from the world of *The Sandman* with a last bow.

# CHAPTER I: THE MEN (AND THE TOOLS)

## 1.1. Gaiman's biography

Neil Gaiman easily slips away from one single definition, as he cannot only be described as a novelist. As a matter of fact, he can be called an all-around writer: throughout his life, he has been a journalist, a rock 'n' roll music critic, a book reviewer, a poet, a television script adapter. He wrote short stories as well as novels and, of course, graphic novels. This tremendous variety of genres gives a grasp of a tireless mind constantly looking for new ways of telling a story and that can hardly be labelled under a unique tag.

He was born in Portchester, England, on 10<sup>th</sup> November 1960, above his father's tiny grocery store. His mother introduced him to reading since he was very young, and by the age of three he already knew how to read. He became a voracious reader and tackled every kind of book. Gaiman, a self-described "feral child who was raised in libraries" (Gaiman, 2015), spent most of his days as a child in the local library, devouring books with no discrimination. However, he particularly favoured stories of magic and fantasy by authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, Ursula K. LeGuin, G. K. Chesterton, H. P. Lovecraft, C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. In the summer of 1967, a friend of his father brought him a cardboard box full of comics, Gaiman fell in love with the genre and at eleven years old decided he wanted to write comic books for a living. These comics came from America and young Neil was strikingly impressed by the way they presented the country: "these comics presented America and the legends of the Norse gods in a similar way – heroic figures completing monumental challenges in a vast and

seemingly magical landscape.” (Olson, 2005, 12) But when he met the professional counsellor who was supposed to direct him towards his dream job and eventually told him he wanted to become a comic writer, the counsellor thoughtlessly dismissed him and suggested considering a career in accountancy. Gaiman, deeply hurt, put aside his dream for nine solid years, however he did not give it up entirely and eventually found his way to make it into his work.

He began his writing career in the 80s as a journalist for some British newspapers (such as *The Observer* and *The Sunday Times of London Magazine*) with the sole intention of getting better in writing and knowing the world around him. Eventually his goal was to become a writer of fiction, novels and comics and films, but he had to get thick skinned first. He “learned to write by writing” (Gaiman, 2016, 489): it did not matter what he was talking about, as long as this would get him a bit closer to his dream.

In 1984 comics came back into his life: while he was waiting at Victoria Station, in London, he noticed a newsstand with piles of comics, Alan Moore’s *Swamp Thing* 25 (a graphic novel about a monster half human and half plant) stood out; Gaiman started flicking through it and the old flame for graphic novels burnt again. He started a correspondence with Moore (*V for Vendetta*, *Watchmen*) and they immediately became friends: as if he was his pupil, Alan taught Gaiman how to write a comic script.

Furthermore, from an unfortunate incident with a publishing house gone broke, Neil met Dave McKean, a young and talented cartoonist. The two clicked instantly and started not only a personal but also professional relationship, as they began working together. Their first work was a graphic novel called *Violent Cases*, published by Escape Books, which immediately brought them to DC comics’ attention. In 1986, some talent-hunters from DC attended the annual U.K. Comics Convention in order to court some British writers and artists and get them involved with American projects. Gaiman and McKean suggested reviving one of the forgotten DC characters, Black

Orchid, and create a new comic around it and the publishing house accepted. The graphic novel progressed well enough to the point that DC asked the duo to work with them again and do something else once the comic was published. Gaiman put on the table the idea of bringing back *The Sandman*, a crime character from the 70s, but what appealed him was the idea of someone able to walk and operate in the land of Dreaming: he got rid of the original series and reworked the whole story instead. The British artist created a completely different graphic novel, way more mature than the comics people were used to, with an in-depth psychological cut on both characters and stories. *The Sandman* was firstly published in 1988 and it promptly reached the first positions of book charts: an immediate success which continued through the years, as the series became one of DC's top selling titles, eclipsing even *Batman* and *Superman*. (Hoal, 2013) The graphic novel will be later discussed in length in Chapter II of this dissertation.

*The Sandman* opened up a fortunate season of writing for Gaiman. As aforementioned, he did not constrain himself into one genre, and while working at the comic, he paired up with one of the best loved British writers, Terry Pratchett (*Discworld* series), to write his first novel, *Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch* (1990), a completely over-the-top adventure of a demon and an archangel trying to prevent Armageddon from happening. To *Good Omens* followed *Neverwhere* (1995), *Stardust* (1999), *American Gods* (2001), *Coraline* (2002), *Anansi Boys* (2005), *The Graveyard Book* (2008), *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013) and *Norse Mythology* (2017).

However, there is a *fil rouge* that connects all of his works, from prose fiction to graphic novels: Gaiman's narrative always refers to another world that collides and overlaps with ours, to a hidden path that takes the protagonist to something other than ordinary, to a different level of perception of reality.

This subtle otherness is usually very close to the present reality and difficult to recognise sometimes it can present itself to the protagonist as a door to cross, or as a road to follow, or as an entity that does not entirely bend to the rules of planet Earth. In Freudian terms, this element can relate to the sphere of the *unheimlich*, translated in English as the uncanny, and it refers to something close to the familiar and ordinary but somehow detached from it, unsettling, scary, disturbing. (Freud, 1919, 234-257) His writing is always filled with a hidden sense, a long-lost echo or shadow that gleams over the surface of troubled waters and that is because most of Gaiman's oeuvre belongs to the literary genre of fantasy. It is difficult to provide a precise definition of this genre, as many literary works that fall under this umbrella term of fantasy differ in forms and characteristics. However, Jackson states that fantasy "has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently 'new', absolutely 'other' and different." (2005, 8) Generally considered as "popular" and "lowbrow", hence confined to mere escapism, fantasy literature actually provides an alternative way to deal with complicated issues, deeply rooted into the historical context a specific fantasy work belonged to (for instance, the First and Second World War and their consequences for writers such as Lewis and Tolkien, or the death of God in Pullman's series *His Dark Materials*). Fantasy literature requires the suspension of disbelief and faith in the new reality created by the author. The genre exploded halfway through the nineteenth century because of the massive changes the world was undergoing at the time (as the industrial revolution and the new Darwinian theories on the evolution of species), and it became central to children's literature. Children's fantasy can usually be divided into two streams. The first begins in the Victorian era and includes works such as Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Kingsley's *The Water-babies* and Nesbit's *Five Children and It*. It usually had didactic and moralistic goals (even though Carroll's *Alice* is an exception), as these stories were intended

to admonish their young audience and direct it towards a more proper behaviour. (Tosi, Paruolo, 2011, 175 – 205) Just between the First and Second World Wars, fantasy has found a renewed popularity amongst readers that still keeps its audience flipping through its pages. Tolkien and Lewis were the initiators of this second wave and their masterpieces, *The Lord of the Rings* for the former and *The Chronicles of Narnia* for the latter, were established as exemplary models by the next generation of fantasy writers, who tried either to imitate them or to move away from them. Tolkien and Lewis's greatest achievement was to "normalise the idea of secondary world[s]" (James, 2012, 65), of these alternative, fantastic creations that stand beside our ordinary world. Tolkien in particular gave a precise definition of the term, stating that

the story-maker proves a successful 'sub-creator'. He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. (1964, 36-7)

Furthermore, both writers integrated in their imaginary worlds their passion for the Middle Ages (which they both studied) and the idea of chivalric quest, where the protagonist(s) embarks in a long journey that will lead her or him to ultimately save the Secondary World (usually portrayed as subject to decay) from evil forces and to personal growth.

Gaiman inherits this fantasy tradition and in his works usually borrows the dreamlike and symbolic dimension from Victorian fantasy, leaving behind its moralistic and pedagogic intentions; from this latest revival he adopts not only the element of the heroic quest (in works such as *Stardust* and *Neverwhere*) but also, and especially, the building of coherent and strong secondary worlds. This is particularly true in *The Sandman*, where Gaiman constructs a multiverse where mythology, folklore, legends, magic and

ordinary life intersect and interact. This multiverse has specific super-structural rules which govern life inside it, and even mythological characters, who are usually considered almighty and not subject to any kind of control, have to abide by those laws. Gaiman's supernatural characters, though, are far from static: they tend to disobey those rules and leave their allocated places. For instance, at some point in the graphic novel *Lucifer*, bored with his existence, decides to leave his place as Lord of Hell, expels all the demons and damned souls from the pit and hands over the keys of an empty Hell to Dream of the Endless, *Sandman's* protagonist, who is left to fix the situation. The writer is not afraid of playing, getting into competition with, adopting and adapting other writers: as a matter of fact, he is actually very good at taking someone else's voice and make it his own. An exemplary model can be found in the version of Shakespeare he portrayed in *The Sandman*.

## 1.2. Adapting Shakespeare for a Young Adult audience

### 1.2.1. What is Adaptation and why we adapt

To define the term “adaptation” is no easy task. The word per se already entails two different ways of thinking about it: adaptation is both a process and a product. (Hutcheon, 2013, 15) First and foremost, though, an adaptation presents itself for what it is: the altering of an original text into something new. It openly declares its nature. Borrowing Gérard Genette’s terminology, adaptations are inherently “palimpsestuous” (Genette, 1997, ix) works, which means they are inevitably linked to other previous texts, part of the literary canon: “any writing is rewriting.” (Prince in Genette, 1997, ix). Adaptations always imply an original work to begin with, a prior text they inevitably refer to. This unavoidable subordination does not nonetheless suggest an inferiority of the adaptation. When it comes to it, in the mind of the public, the term usually takes on a negative connotation: the “*hypertext*” (Genette, 1997, 5) (which is the adaptation) is considered less important, already second-rate, mediocre compared to the “*hypotext*” (Genette, 1997, 5) (the original text). The brand-new hypertext starts with great disadvantage to the hypotext, because it is thought of not as a creative act, but as an imitation, a mere reproduction. It is considered a degradation of the original text, in the sense that an adaptation is always “less literature” compared to the prior work and somehow ruins it. However, according to Hutcheon:

An adaptation is not vampiric: it does not draw the life-blood from the its source and leave it dying or dead, nor is it paler than the adapted work. It may, on the contrary, keep the prior work alive, giving it an afterlife it would never have had otherwise. (2013, 176)

Thus, even though Western culture has inherited the (post-) Romantic revaluation of the original creation above all forms of borrowings, adaptation



has still a great appeal in our time. Hutcheon describes adaptation in three different ways:

- adaptation as a “*formal entity or product*” (Hutcheon, 2013, 7) or “an acknowledged transposition of a recognisable other work or works” (Hutcheon, 2013, 8);
- as a “*process of creation*” (Hutcheon, 2013, 8) or “a creative and an interpretative act of appropriation” (Hutcheon, 2013, 8);
- as a “*process of reception*” (Hutcheon, 2013, 8) or “an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work” (Hutcheon, 2013, 8).

The first view, adaptation as a product, involves usually a transportation to another mode: this always means change and consequently gains and losses in the new format. Adaptations are “re-mediations, that is, specifically translations in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system (for example, words) to another (for example, images).” (Hutcheon, 2013, 16) According to the second definition, adaptation is also a process of creation, and this entails an act of appropriation, which means taking possession of another’s story and interpreting it according to one’s own perspective, making the adapted material one’s own. Hence, adaptation becomes a double process of interpreting and then creating something new. It should be noted that Hutcheon and Sanders diverge on the definition of adaptation and appropriation, as the latter applies a different distinction between them. Adaptation, in her opinion, overtly informs the reader about the relationship the hypertext has with the hypotext either through its title or through other references. (Sanders, 2016, 35) On the other hand, appropriation requires a transformation of the hypotext into a completely different product, for example through a change of genre or medium (here intended as means of communication). (Sanders, 2016, 35)

Finally, adaptation as a process of reception implies an intertextual dimension of the text: because of its own nature, it blatantly refers to other easily recognisable works. However, in order for it to produce a response in the audience, be it of satisfaction or annoyance, it must appeal to the memory of the public. In order to experience difference as well as similarity, an audience has to be able to recognize the hypotext and eventually enjoy (or not) the hypertext. According to Sanders, adaptation depends “on the literary canon for the provision of a shared repository of storylines, themes, characters and ideas upon which their creative variations can be made.” (2016, 57) The mnemonic element is tied up with repetition: the public is accustomed to finding comfort in the monotonous rhythm of lullabies and nursery rhymes told and retold since childhood. Nonetheless, as aforementioned, adaptation involves also a certain, though variable, degree of change, which depends upon the cultural, historical, economic and social context the hypertext belongs to. Hence, adaptation is repetition without replication:

[it] is how stories evolve and mutate to fit new times and different places. [...] We retell – and show again and interact anew with – stories over and over; in the process, they change with each repetition, and yet they are recognisably the same. What they are not is necessarily inferior or second-rate – or they would not have survived. Temporal precedence does not mean anything more than temporal priority. (Hutcheon, 2013, 176-7)

### **1.2.2. “What’s in a name?” (Shakespeare, 2000, 2.I.86): a brief history of Shakespeare’s fame through adaptations**

Shakespeare crystallised in Western civilisation as the highest form of Culture, a “cultural deity” (Levine, 1988, 53), as Lawrence Levine stated. The process of elevating the Bard to a transcendental figure which represents the

icon of good taste, cultural refinement and intellectual ability of our culture began immediately after his death, with the publication of the First Folio. In 1623, John Heminges and Henry Condell collected all his plays into a single book, transforming a performative act (that of the play) into a literary, printed one. As an introduction to the Folio, Ben Jonson wrote a poem to honour his dead friend and addressed him as “he who was not of an age, but for all time...” (1623, lxii, v. 43), framing him as an international timeless classic. Shakespeare incorporates the idea of the Author, both a natural talent who effortlessly dedicates his life to the creative act and, at the same time, an erudite poet who thoroughly polishes his language. However, the Shakespeare the public gets to know nowadays is not the mirror of the true, ancient Bard, but an idealisation of how he was considered during the centuries, an alteration of the original version. Shakespeare himself was an adapter, so his narratives were already pieces of different tales sewed together and moulded to his will. Fischlin and Fortier state that “as long as there have been plays by Shakespeare, there have been adaptations of those plays.” (2000, 1) Though he was definitely popular amongst his contemporaries, during the Restoration his texts demanded a revision in order to be staged again when Charles II lifted the nearly twenty-year ban over London theatres in 1660. Shakespearean texts were made more apt to suit contemporary tastes and political concerns and modernised to cut out what was perceived as archaic, and plots were recast to serve royalist perspectives. An example is Nahum Tate’s adaptation of *King Lear* (1680), who eliminated the role of the Fool, added a love story between Edgar and Cornelia and gave the play a happy ending, closing it with the glorious restoration of Lear’s dynasty instead of Cornelia’s and his death.

The eighteenth century saw Shakespeare’s popularity growing exponentially, particularly because he clashed with the neo-classical principles dominant at the time. Refusing to subdue to the Aristotelian rules of unity of time, place and action, Shakespearean works created an alternative to the French

paradigm of theatre. The everlasting conflict (both cultural and political) between France and the United Kingdom reinforced the idea of Shakespeare as an outsider, a writer who stood alone and refused to bend to the rules and therefore regarded as specifically British, the genius of a newly empowered middle class and of British national culture. According to Lanier, “[...] Shakespeare’s ‘irregularity’ [began] to take on an anti-aristocratic, quasi-democratic cast. Neoclassicism was closely linked to inherited authority, both to the ‘ancients’ and to the *ancient régime*, and Shakespeare seemed to reject both.” (2002, 31) Hence, he acquired the status he would hold throughout the following centuries: he came to represent the British theatre and Englishness. The eighteenth century was also marked out by the promotion of this newly bourgeois British Shakespeare thanks to the efforts of David Garrick, the actor and producer of the Drury Lane Theatre from 1749 till 1776. He established the role of the actor-manager: more and more theatrical companies started to revolve around an actor or a group of actors who took on the task of managing the troupe and performing lead roles in Shakespearean plays, specifically adapted to highlight the acting of such roles.

With the following century came the Romantic period and the Victorian era, which witnessed a peak in Shakespeare’s mass appeal as well as crucial shifts in Shakespeare’s cultural status. Following Kant’s definition of genius as “the talent that gives the rule to the art, [...] the innate mental predisposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to the art” (1987, 174), the Romantics identified Shakespeare as such genius and constructed the concept of Bardolatry, forging the idea of the poet without formal education who wrote from natural intuition.

Victorians picked up on that idea, bringing Shakespeare to the top of his popularity, in England as much as in the rest of Europe and in the United States. The Victorian age was indeed a prolific playground for all kind of adaptations, as Victorians used the literary canon in order to “plunder

characters, plotlines and generic conventions, as well as narrative idiom and style.” (Sanders, 2016, 152) Shakespeare was particularly appreciated and remodelled to become “a focus of disciplinary forces concerned with controlling and transforming traditional popular recreations regarded as potential threats to social order.” (Lanier, 2002, 36) His characters underwent the process of “novelisation”, which changed their public reception. They were no longer perceived just as literary devices but also as three-dimensional personas, with biographical histories and psychological insights which deepened their experience and made the audience empathise with them. Examples of this tendency are rewritings such as Browning’s poem *Caliban upon Setebos* and Renan’s closet drama *Caliban: Suite de “La Tempête”*. (Lanier, 2002, 35) These narratives brought Shakespeare

in line with Victorian domestic mores, particularly those linked to the behaviour of women. [...] Paternal authority [was] placed beyond question [...]. Women, by contrast, [became] virtuous by submitting to their fathers or husbands [...]. Shakespeare’s women [were] presented as models of marital duty who, by submitting to their husbands, [could] become public figures, exercising authority in the community through their moral examples. (Lanier, 2002, 35-6)

The processes in place during that period determined de facto the elevation of Shakespeare to an instrument of cultural assimilation: he came to be regarded as an English “classic”, formally integrated in the academic curriculum and therefore central to the formation of English as a discipline. The publication of the Globe edition, the first Shakespeare edition entirely curated by university scholars, was the last step to completely incorporate him in the higher education programme, as the two greatest British universities institutionalised him as central in their English curriculum, Cambridge in 1878 and Oxford in 1884. The institutionalisation of Shakespeare was also a response to the fast-paced whirlwind of modernity.

To fix the Bard as the pole star inside the British canon meant to hold still some of the cultural values in an ever-changing world. With the advent of the industrial revolution and the new world asset in constant speed came the fear of culture slipping away from the frame the tradition enclosed it in. Thus culture, and Shakespeare as its stronghold, took on itself the role of holding together the traditional values against the non-stopping change of the modern era.

This became even more obvious at the beginning of the twentieth century. The rise of capitalism reinforced the distinction between upper and lower classes, positioning the malleable middle class against the mob of workers. This divide brought to the surface the need for a new method of communication, something that levelled that distinction and that was immediately available to everyone, aside from class discrimination. Mass culture and mass media perfectly embodied that need, providing new ways of getting in touch with that subject usually precluded to the lower class, even though it clashed with the Culture commonly conveyed by the universities. However, mass culture and mass media also posed many issues: the celerity of mass reproduction amplified the scale of the audience art works were made for, instantly turning the term "popular culture" into "mass entertainment", and therefore subjected to commercial interests. Art was starting to be considered a consumer commodity, losing the "aura" that, according to Walter Benjamin (1935, 232), was essential to make an art-piece unique. Such concerns, instead of narrowing the rift between high culture and commercial pop culture, deepened that gap. Amongst all this, Shakespeare "presented both sides of the cultural divide" (Lanier, 2002, 41), serving at the same time as the "centre of the newly professionalised discipline of English" (Lanier, 2002, 41) and as "a writer with a long-standing reputation for being 'popular'." (Lanier, 2002, 41) Nevertheless, the Bard constituted a hallmark for popular culture: as Lanier stated, he "has become a reliable source of ready-made cultural prestige, a way of lifting up virtually

any pop product out of its trivial status.” (2002, 43) Adaptations of Shakespearean dramas were used in the early days of cinema production in order to promote it and make it known to a wider audience. After the consolidation of the Hollywood system in the 1930s, Shakespeare was progressively abandoned. Cinema definitely established its power over theatre, because the former approached all kinds of spectators regardless of any classist conception, whereas the latter still preserved that elitist allure typical of something tied up with the academia. (Lanier, 2002, 45)

The last two decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century witnessed a revival of Shakespeare’s fame, with an outstanding explosion of Shakespearean adaptations. Authors seemed to re-appropriate the Bard both as a tool for financial profit (kicking off the Bardbiz, Shakespeare’s industry) and as a way to elevate the final art product: Miller’s on point argumentation (2003, 1-8) reveals that behind Shakespeare’s name resides the validation of the literary status quo of a work of art, and, at the same time, the rejection of traditional, post-Romantic values typical of Western culture. New media opened the door for new possibilities of adaptation and therefore nowadays, it could be argued, there is no more just one Shakespeare, but tons of “Shakespeares”, as many as there are adaptations of his plays. (Hulbert, Wetmore and York, 2016, 1) Movies like Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* (1996), John Madden’s *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and Michael Hoffman’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1999) are all part of this trend, treading between homage and parody. Moreover, Disney’s *The Lion King* (1994) and *The Little Mermaid* (1989) are rewritings of respectively *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* (Finkelstein, 1999, 179-196), not to mention references to various Shakespearean plays in the *Harry Potter* series (Hermione’s name from *The Winter’s Tale*’s character, just to make an obvious example). All of these films and novels target specifically one peculiar part of the social fabric: teenagers.

### 1.2.3. Shakespeare for the Young

Of all new audiences for Shakespeare, children and young adults are at once the most open and enthusiastic as well as potentially the most likely to be misdirected or even disappointed by their initial encounters with the Bard. (Miller, 2003, 2)

Delivering Shakespeare to the youngest section of his audience is a task to be handled with care. In the anglophone world, the Bard is usually first approached by British youths in secondary education classrooms, where teachers right away face the most problematic issues with Shakespearean works: boredom and inaccessibility. A young audience have no interest in Shakespeare, as he is perceived as distant from their reality and his plays are believed to have no relevance to their lives. And even though someone might find him interesting, other problems rise preventing any close contact with the poet: language, and a distant culture, for example. Boredom and inaccessibility are inevitably intertwined: "inaccessibility usually leads to boredom." (Hulbert, Wetmore and York, 2006, 2) Therefore, most of the education industry is devoted to make Shakespeare cooler, more accessible and more appealing to young adults. Three different ways of dealing with the anxiety of relevance are translations (or changing of linguistic code), reduction (or stripping a play to its essential elements), and reference (or quoting the text, the characters, the plot or Shakespeare himself directly or indirectly, either with or without explanation). (Hulbert, Wetmore, York and Wetmore, 2006, 1 - 4) These three "coping mechanisms" are not mutually exclusive, they can and often do overlap. However, youngsters are not passive recipients of these adaptations, instead they have agency and power over them. As a matter of fact, these specific kinds of Shakespearean adaptations are precisely made to make them enjoy the Bard, to make him look closer to their world, and therefore the industry has to look after the needs and requests of youth culture.



Youth culture came into being around the 1950s in the United States and further developed in following decade, becoming a counterculture: a rejection of tradition and parental authority was its most specific feature, alongside with rock-and-roll music, juvenile delinquency, experimentation with narcotics and a growing sense of political empowerment. Furthermore, youth culture was and still is a “fundamentally mediated culture, one that continues to represent itself in terms of the products it buys, the art that defines it and the art it defines as its own” (Lewis, 2014, 4), establishing a “dialectic of cultural autonomy and media appropriation.” (Lewis, 2014, 4) Thus, the identity of this new culture is constructed and revolves around a fundamental paradox: it is a media-made culture and, at the same time, it is a culture that makes media. Youths are inherently consumptive: they consume what comes from the media while simultaneously dictating what the media have to produce. Therefore, another crucial characteristic intrinsic to this ever-consuming hunger is that juvenile culture appropriates whatever comes to its way, as teenagers generally don’t work, have no responsibilities, but have money, time and interests and thus they can ingest whatever they please, bending it to meet their needs.

“Shakespop” (Lanier, 2002, 17), then, is a product of that collective consuming. It is part of a cultural and unavoidably economic exchange: youth culture, “such as rock or hip-hop music, graphic novels or teen films, gives Shakespeare ‘street cred’, whereas Shakespeare gives youth ‘cultural cred’.” (Hulbert, Wetmore and York, 2006, 8) The Bard hence provides that credibility youth culture lacks by definition, giving inherent confidence to that group and at the same time granting it some trustworthiness to the eye of the most conservatives. However, conveying Shakespeare through youth culture to a young audience also means that the different Shakespeares conveyed are ranked by that audience, creating a separation between what is

considered “in” and what “out”. The young adult audience creates inner groups, distinguishing between the cool Shakespeare and the unpopular one. The identity of that young public is not just one, but becomes a multiplicity. Depending on which youth group Shakespeare is being promoted to, that group takes on a different identity. At the same time, that same group consists of different individuals who at their turn shape it from the inside. Another factor to be taken account of is the different type of media used to mediate the Bard. Accordingly, this distinction of media projects once more a distinction of the receiving audience, thus “a multiplicity of Shakespeare is met by a multiplicity of audiences with a multiplicity of contexts and frames for understanding.” (Hulbert, Wetmore and York, 2006, 9)

Youth culture Shakespearean adaptations involve every media, from video games to comic books, from novels to music, not without any criticism. As a matter of fact, cultural and political conservatives declared Shakespop a corruption, a vulgarity, something that sullied the true spirit of Shakespeare, while they also complained about the Bard dissolving from universities and from popular knowledge, replaced by other forms of literary “culture”, such as Toni Morrison, rap music and multicultural literature. However, ironically enough, most Shakespop is culturally conservative. Films such as *Dead Poets Society* or *10 Things I Hate About You* use controversial, unconventional educational figures who adopt Shakespeare as a way to help marginalised young people to sort out their own life. Thus, this kind of movies upheld the Bard to his place at the height of culture, using him as a compass to the correct and rightful upbringing of misguided youths. Shakespop confirms Shakespeare’s canonicity, value and “appropriate place at the top of the curriculum and the culture.” (Hulbert, Wetmore and York, 2006, 12)

Shakespop inevitably intertwines with one of the newest forms of literature expressly directed to teens that has taken place in the last years: Young Adult (YA) narrative. This literary genre touches topical themes dear to a juvenile

audience usually in a direct, not sugar-coated way such as adolescence as a transition towards adulthood, the lure of transgression and extreme adventures, the search for an identity of one's own, the first sexual experiences, the obstacles in the relationship with family and friends. (Tosi, 2014, 79) YA novels fit perfectly in that place between entertainment and education, as they usually represent a transposition of classic texts. They are highly recommended not only as individual readings but also as classroom discussion material, given the close interpolation occurring between themes treated inside those books and teen lives. Authors of YA novels usually adopt a first-person narration to get an insight on the Shakespearean characters' mind and give them space to justify their actions and behaviours. YA novels most of the times share some features with *fan fictions*, a "democratic genre" (Pugh, 2005, 47) where authors, usually fans of a specific text, author or film rewrite and rework them to a new design. These authors can create alternative versions of those narrative universes, adding details to the plot or deepening the description of a character, changing some events or completely modifying the plot. *Fan fictions* invent new stories and different fictional worlds as much as YA narrations: picking up on narrative gaps or placing themselves in unexplored spaces of the canon, both genres are free to experiment. They show to the reading audience the "what ifs" of a story and the consequences of those supposed alternatives, describing other new things still fitting in the same original narrative context.

The questions that must be addressed are many: why Shakespeare? Why and how do we make him accessible and comprehensible to children and young adults? As aforementioned in the previous chapter, Shakespeare came to embody the humanist values crucial to Western culture. This concept, though, brings with it another issue: it is culture itself that decides which values should be upheld by contemporary society, choosing qualities that should be passed on from generation to generation in order for them to

maintain the same prestige. Hence, reality is never objective, but always constructed, mediated. Another problem derives from this assertion : original children and young adult literature as much as adaptations and appropriations (whether Shakespearean or not) are all written by adults for that juvenile audience, in a situation where the former declares to be superior to the latter as in possession of the “cultural capital”. (Hateley, 2009, 1) Bourdieu coined the term in 1973 and defined it as the accumulation of knowledge, behaviours and skills that a person can tap into to demonstrate one’s cultural competence and social status. What children receive is thus a mediated literature, “a ‘space’ for children produced and supervised by adults” (Hateley, 2009, 12) where “learned/inculcated dispositions and ‘tastes’ are rendered natural and normative within a framework of cultural capital, and are linked inextricably by a classified vision of society.” (Hateley, 2009, 12) Reading Shakespeare becomes then a signifier of the cultured and educated, a mark of a highly refined instruction and upbringing. Furthermore, adults have a twofold conception of children and teens: a young audience is both composed of present youngsters, and of future adults that will one day be part of society. The task of grown individuals then is to convey through literature those values considered essential for a society to function. According to Hateley,

[w]hen Shakespeare is interpolated into children’s literature, the ‘value’ of literacy and cultural capital is performed in the present but also projects a future ‘high-literacy’ and establishes the goal not just of future reading, but the future reading of Shakespeare. Thus present-adults produce and circulate qualities they consider inherently valuable, in order to create future-adults who share such views. (Hateley, 2009, 13)

It is thus a political act to adopt and adapt Shakespeare, his works are used as tools of a social education motivated towards regulating the reader's mind, who subconsciously acquires a specific attitude toward power (political, social and personal), hierarchy, gender, class, and race. YA authors, for instance, take on the task to help teens dealing with problems of their age as a phase of rebellion, however this disobedience is never real, it is always inscribed inside an evolutionary path already traced by society. Therefore, authors become guides of an intended, only-falsely-casual layout aimed at shaping already determined grown-ups. Hateley furtherly argues that

intertextual appropriations of Shakespeare for children serve to discursively reflect and produce normative behaviours with specific reference to cultural and literary value, inculcating a sense of cultural capital, while also inscribing [specific] [...] positions in relation to such capital generally and Shakespeare specifically.  
(Hateley, 2009, 15)

In her analysis, though, Hateley does not recognise any agency to young readers, reducing them to passive spectators of a foretold destiny, with no power to react.

### **1.3. A dance between the visible and the invisible: the graphic novel as an in-between land**

#### **1.3.1. Definition and introduction to the medium**

McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (1993, 9). Tabachnick uses McCloud’s interpretation to delineate the graphic novel, stating that it is an “extended comic book freed of commercial constrictions, written by adults and for adults, and able to tackle complex and sophisticated issues.” (2017, 1) As a matter of fact, the graphic novel is one of the newest media today (or, to be correct, one of the newest to be rediscovered today, as will be analysed in the next paragraph), and because of that it suffers from the newcomer’s syndrome: just a few critics consider it as serious enough to deal with major issues as narrative prose, poetry and the theatre have done for centuries. However, through the years the graphic novel has evolved and proved itself a respectable literary and artistic medium to convey important messages. It came to include different genres, both fiction and non-fiction, as memoirs, biographies, heroic fantasy series, detective stories, adaptations of literary texts including the classics, and more. Nowadays, the rise of the graphic novel is due to three different reasons. First and foremost, the very nature of reading is changing, and the graphic novel demands “a hybrid kind of reading which involves viewing as well as reading per se.” (Tabachnick, 2017, 2) The second reason springs from the first, as the immediacy of the experience requires a combination of words and visual images which the graphic novel by its nature provides as opposed to other visual media. And third, the array of genres the graphic novel now includes varies a lot and most of these works are not available in any other media. (Tabachnick, 2017, 2 – 3)

As aforementioned, the graphic novel is a collaborative medium that relies on the interaction of different kinds of symbols (usually, pictures and words combined) or by a sequence of images in relation to one another to create meaning. It also requires an active reading audience, who can add additional information to the work. Graphic novels are at the same time reductive and additive, as “the creator reduces the ideas that the creator wants to communicate into a finite set of symbols and the reader adds in additional information in the process of decoding the presentation”. (Duncan and Smith, 2017, 8) Usually they are the outcome of close teamwork: a group of collaborators splits the tasks of writing the script, line artwork, colouring, and so on. Graphic novels follow a precise structure constituted of four different key elements that are essential and almost ever-present in the medium: the panel, the sequence, the page and the narrative. (Duncan and Smith, 2017, 10)

The panel is defined as a section on the page that captures a fundamental moment or scene and lays the foundations of a graphic novel. It is the creator who decides which key moment(s) to enclose into a panel. This component can incorporate a longer period than a single static frame, as, for instance, two characters can have an entire dialogue in the same panel with a single still image. Abel and Madden determine another four fundamental elements that compose the panel: framing, blocking, acting and *mise-en-scène*. (in Duncan and Smith, 2017, 10) A frame is the border that defines the panel. It is usually rectangular but it can vary, and that variation produces a change in the reception of the scene: a rectangular frame is used to outline a common setting, and, when the illustrations are in a sequence, they can communicate the progression of the story; a thick or jagged border can indicate an unusual situation, a decisive moment for example; a scalloped line might suggest a flashback or a memory retrieved by a character; and so forth. Another important factor is the size of the frame, which can occupy either a section or

a full page, altering the emphasis creators want to give to that specific panel. Also, creators can decide the focus they want to put on the objects inside the frame changing the point of view, so the reader can find medium panels (characters are portrayed from the waist up), close-up panels (focus on a specific element) and establishing panels (long shots usually used to define the setting of a new scene). (Duncan and Smith, 2017, 11 – 13) The second key component is the placement of characters within a panel, which is called blocking. It usually underlines the relationship between objects inside a panel, as creators consciously choose who and how to portray within a frame. (Duncan and Smith, 2017, 13) The third factor to take into consideration when constructing a panel is acting, or how characters' emotions, body posture, and gestures are displayed and the way they are perceived by the reader. (Duncan and Smith, 2017, 14) And to conclude, the last element of a panel is the *mise-en-scène*, or what elements creators decide to present to the reader. It includes characters, backgrounds, dialogues and sound effects appearing within the frame and it can vary from panel to panel. Words are the most essential element of this feature: they can be present (usually, but not only) as dialogues, thoughts, sound effects and captions. Dialogues and sound effects belong to the level of the story, they take place within it and therefore are called diegetic sounds. Other words placed in captions are called non-diegetic sounds, as they happen outside the story per se. (Duncan and Smith, 2017, 15 – 17) McCloud describes seven different relationships between words and images, the most common being the interdependent relationship. (1993, 153 – 155) These combinations can be:

- Word specific: pictures illustrates but do not add meaning to the overall text;
- Picture specific: words are just “soundtrack to a visually told sequence” (McCloud, 1993, 153)



- Duo-specific: words and pictures are both essential and convey the same message;
- Additive: words expand the message sent by the picture;
- Parallel: words and image seem to follow different, non-intersecting courses;
- Montage: words are part of the bigger picture;
- Interdependent: “words and pictures go hand by hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone.” (McCloud, 1993, 155)

After the panel, the next structural feature of a graphic novel is the sequence, which is composed of juxtaposed panels, placed in relationship to one another. (Duncan and Smith, 2017, 17) The creators have the ability to select which elements of the story to portray in order to build a coherent narrative. Usually, two juxtaposed panels create a space between them called gutter. It may appear as a white, normal space left by two adjacent panels, or as a thin black line when there is no space at all, or again not appear at all when one panel overlaps with the next or blends with it. (Duncan and Smith, 2017, 18) The gutter allows the readers to perform a process called “closure” (McCloud, 1993, 63), where they infer information implied by the author, not expressly depicted. It is the place where the reader becomes an active agent, adding pieces to and filling up the gaps of the story. Each gutter provides a transition, because panels tend to skip moments in the storytelling. There are three most common types of transition: action-to-action (when a single subject progresses), subject-to-subject (when it stays in the same scene but changes its subject) and scene-to-scene (when it involves moving through time and space). When panels and gutters occur in a sequence, they create coherent storytelling. (Duncan and Smith, 2017, 19 – 20)

The third element to consider is the page. (Duncan and Smith, 2017, 20) Creators have to be aware of the actual layout of the graphic novel to arrange panels in strips or tiers, so that the comic book can work best for the reader.

Usually, in the West, people read a page in a Z-pattern, starting at the top left of the page, proceeding left to right, then down and left to the next level, and so on. In an ordinary graphic novel, creators tend to put one panel after the other in a continuous ribbon, but sometimes they can vary to keep the reader's attention. Splash pages (an entire page for a single panel) serve for a dramatic effect to the story, maybe for a surprising introduction or to add suspense. Creators can place smaller panels inside a larger panel, to strengthen the relationship between them. Another way to vary the usual order of reading is for creators to take advantage of the layout of printed books and use the space of two pages printed side-by-side, creating a double-page spread. (Duncan and Smith, 2017, 20 – 22)

To conclude, the final element composing a graphic novel is the narrative. In a graphic novel, the story tends to be complex and develops for many pages. Successful narratives manage to convey major themes and ideas through the story, balancing convention with invention. Five different components create effective storytelling: a protagonist, the main character inside a story, who has to overcome challenges and with whom the reader can empathise; a spark, the kick-off of the narrative progression, an event that changes the normal routine; the escalation, the development of a story through challenges and conflicts for the protagonist; the climax, the highest tension point all the narration aims to; and finally the denouement, the epilogue of the story, where order is restored or a new one is created. (Duncan and Smith, 2017, 22 – 24)

Thus, the graphic novel sets a compromise between readership and authorship, a tight relationship where the latter delivers part of the message it wants to convey while the former actively participates in decoding that message.

To get its final shape, though, the graphic novel had to undergo significant changes in its structure before reaching recognition and success.

### 1.3.2. A brief history of the graphic novel

Defying all traditional literary conventions, the graphic novel had to fight long and hard to get its legitimate place in the literary canon. Popular belief has it that the graphic novel is one of the newest media on the market. However, according to McCloud, we can trace its beginnings about thirty-two centuries ago, in Egypt, in a scene inscribed in a tomb of an ancient scribe, or in a pre-Columbian picture manuscript, found by Cortés in 1519 but much older than that. The *Bayeux Tapestry* (second half of the eleventh century) and medieval illustrated manuscripts (such as *The Tortures of Saint Erasmus*, 1460) can be added to the list. (McCloud, 1993, 10 – 15) However, comics and graphic novels in their modern structure date back to eighteenth-century England, where William Hogarth, James Gillray and Thomas Rowlandson were experimenting with elements that would become essential for graphic novels much later, such as sequential panels creating a sort of narration. Another proto-comics artist was Laurence Sterne with his novel *Tristram Shandy* (1759), where illustrations were part of the narrative. They were included by Sterne himself and were essential for readers to understand the book. Fundamental to the development of comics was Rodolphe Töpffer, a Swiss professor who, in the early nineteenth century, wrote *Histoire de Monsieur Jabot*, building a narrative through dynamic and sketchy drawings placed inside panels of different dimensions, where characters' words were inscribed into white balloons. This form of narration started to catch on in magazines in France, England and Germany, where Wilhelm Busch's comics *Marx and Moritz* definitely established the connection between comics and children. (Tabachnick, 2017, 26 – 28)

Finally, the new medium reached America. This was the first period of American comics, which lasted from 1890 till 1930. At the time, America was a favourite destination for immigrants, and newspapers of that period used comics to reach that part of the audience which did not understand English

well. Because of this connection to immigrants and children's entertainment, comics were always considered mere entertainment with simplistic themes. Nonetheless, those comics actually were concerned with important topics, such as the difficulties of immigrants to fit into American society, maybe in a light-hearted way. (Tabachnick, 2017, 28)

The second period of comics spans the years 1930 to 1950, embracing one of the darkest periods of American history, with the Great Depression and the Second World War. Difficult times called for drastic measures, and superheroes were invented. Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman and Captain America dealt with pressing social and political issues, crime, conflict and evil. Their superpowers levelled them to gods and reflected America's conception of itself as a superpower. After WWII, comic book writers focused on less serious topics, such as romance, crime, horror and sci-fi. However, such topics started to be considered misleading and damaging to young audiences and the anti-comics psychologist Fredric Wertham at the head of a special committee established the Comics Code Authority, a self-regulatory censoring body which banished scenes of bloodshed, and words such as "horror" and "terror" from comic books. (Tabachnick, 2017, 29)

As unfair as this act can seem, in retrospect it was one of the biggest and most important steps in the development of graphic novels. During the third period of American comics, which runs from 1945 to 1975, the censorship led to the birth of *Mad*, a satirical magazine specifically addressed to grown-ups and therefore free from the restriction of the Comics Code Authority. Inside the magazine, comics flourished especially as a satire against American institutions and society, placing *Mad* as one of the most important instigators of the cultural revolution of the following decades. Furthermore, another comics movement sprang from censorship, as a sign of rebellion against traditional social conventions: counter-culture comix. These comix (spelled with an "x" on purpose) were infused with sex, drug-use and rock 'n' roll, anti-social characters, outrageous satire and overt political statements in

order to break as many taboos as possible. All of this opened the way to the graphic novel, which came into being in the early 1970s. (Tabachnick, 2017, 29 – 30)

Cartoonist Will Eisner was the pioneer of the graphic novel (and also the one who popularised the term) with his collection of short stories *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (1978). His primary goal was to reach a wider audience than that of comics, writing mature stories with private and personal ideas, marking the difference from the light-hearted, funny comics people were used to. Thanks to the impulse of underground comics such as those of R. Crumb, Eisner gave an autobiographic account of New York neighbourhoods he knew since he was young in a stark, direct way, creating a landmark for the evolution of the form. (Tabachnick, 2017, 35 – 38; Weiner, 2017, 41 – 42)

Following Eisner's example, creators in the next decade wrote stories directed to an adult readership that seemed to appreciate Eisner's turn. The first to fully realise Eisner's idea of the graphic novel was Art Spiegelman with his work *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986), where he recounted the imprisonment of his parents in German concentration camps, their escape to America and his mother's suicide. Together with Spiegelman, another two important adult-oriented graphic novels served to boost the reputation of the medium: Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986) and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), both politically charged superhero reinventions embracing vigilante justice. All three of them were milestones that aided the graphic novel to get its righteous recognition as a work of art and not just mere childish entertainment. The growing attention of newspapers and critics towards graphic novels inevitably affected the publishing industry, and when reviews started to appear in some specialized journals, the entertainment industry also noticed the changing role of comics. The cinema actively seized this opportunity and started producing the first

series of Batman movies, opening the way to the flood of superhero films that followed (Weisner, 2017, 43 – 44)

The 1990s were extremely important for two main reasons: Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) and Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* (1988 – 1996). McCloud's work is a non-fictional original graphic novel that can be considered one of the first books to theorise formal aspects of comics. (Weisner, 2017, 48) *The Sandman*, as mentioned before, recounts the story of Dream (also known under the names of Morpheus, Oneiros and others), sovereign of the dream world, coming to terms with his responsibilities as the creator of dreams for humankind and the consequences of his actions. Gaiman proved to be a highly cultured writer who includes classical references in his storylines as well as fantasy themes. The series ran for eight years and included seventy-five issues in total, ultimately collected in ten graphic novels. Each issue was edited by a different artist, and Gaiman was able to capture the essence of the artist he was working with. He wrote tailor-made narratives to suit each talent best. Most importantly, when Gaiman decided to leave the Sandman universe, DC Comics, the publishing house who owned the rights of the character, decided to end the series rather than replace the writer with someone else, highlighting even more the connection between Gaiman and his literary "son". (Weisner, 2017, 48)

In those same years, even libraries understood that the market was profoundly changing, and finally added to their catalogues copies of *Maus*, *Watchmen*, *Understanding Comics* and *Sandman*. Even though the titles were initially sold in the Young Adult section, it was nonetheless a positive signal that things were changing in the business. (Weisner, 2017, 49 – 50)

At the turn of the new millennium, another two graphic novels are worth mentioning: *Persepolis* (2000), by Marjane Satrapi, a semi-autobiographical tale about growing up under the Shah and the Islamic Revolution in Iran, which opened up American readers to the international graphic novel market; and Ellen Forney's *Marbles, Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me*:

*A Graphic Memoir* (2012), where the author describes her life after being diagnosed with bipolar disorder, ultimately resulting in an analysis of creativity itself and of the myth of the crazy artist. (Weisner, 2017, 50 – 55)

Finally, after forty years, Eisner's dream to see the graphic novel right where it belonged came true: it was now

[d]eeply rooted in the American fabric, influencing other branches of the entertainment industry, winning prestigious awards that had been previously denied them, and showing up in public libraries and classrooms both at the public school and the university level. Graphic novels covering a broad range of topics were being released from an ever-expanding publishing base, reaching out of the specialised comic book readership and into the heart of [Western] culture. (Weiner, 2017, 55)

### 1.3.3. Shakespeare in graphic novels

As already discussed, through the centuries Shakespeare has been adapted in diverse media, and graphic novels are no exception. Two different periods of comic Shakespeare can be traced: the first starts from the immediate post-war years to the 1960 and the second dates around the late 1980s and early 1990s. (Wetmore, 2006, 171) The first period was mostly concerned with adapting Shakespearean plays aimed at children of 10 – 12 years-old in the form of *Classics Illustrated*, published by Gilberton Publishing Company from 1941. *Classics Illustrated* were created with a specific educational value that regular comics were missing and allowed comics inside many school systems, as they were used by teachers as a gateway for students towards the original. Their purpose was to encourage young people to read the classics. Gilberton included in their collection five of Shakespeare's plays: *Julius Caesar* (1950), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1951), *Hamlet* (1952), *Macbeth* (1955) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1956). (Wetmore, 2006, 171 – 198) Each issue, however, contained a

biography of the creator and an essay to contextualise the plays: this was perceived as a sort of justification for the use of the medium of comics. Furthermore, on the last page of each issue the texts were referred to as "editions": "Now that you have read the Classics Illustrated edition, don't miss the enjoyment of the original, obtainable at your school or public library." (Wetmore, 2006, 175) Unfortunately, the original purpose of those adaptations most of the time generated the opposite effect: one would read the comic instead of the original. When Wertham created the Comics Code Authority, *Classics Illustrated* became immediately a target, accused to cause to their young audience "reading disorders, mental illnesses, racism, illiteracy, juvenile delinquency, 'sex mania', and even murder." (Wetmore, 2006, 178) These accusations also gave rise to those of unfaithfulness and debasement of the original text: Shakespeare was abandoned for almost 40 years before coming back to the world of comics. (Wetmore, 2006, 172 – 180) During the 1980s the Bard came back into graphic novel narratives only through adaptations but also and mainly through allusion. An example is Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* (1982), where V, an anarchist, tries to blow up the British Parliament in a future dystopian London to restore the power to the people. At the beginning of the comics, V saves a young girl from an attempt of rape by some police officers and recites a passage from *Macbeth*: as Shakespeare is "a symbol of England, and all that is good in England, it makes sense to have [the] hero seize control of that symbol [...]." (Wetmore, 2006, 182)

Neil Gaiman makes quite a different use of Shakespeare in his *Sandman*. The Bard becomes a character inside Dream's world, as the Lord of Dreams, as he was in control of human fantasies, can move through time and space and thus meets people of all epochs and places. Shakespeare is introduced in issue 12, *Men of Good Fortune*, part 4 of the collection *The Doll's House*. The issue shows Dream back in 1589, where he is meeting Hob Gadling, a man who made a bargain with him, which prevented the mortal from dying when



he was supposed to but only when he really wants to, on condition of meeting with Dream once every century. At the tavern where they are supposed to meet, Morpheus overhears a conversation between two young men, Kit Marlowe and Will Shaxberd, where the latter is lamenting his inability to write plays as good as Marlowe's. Dream turns to Hob and asks him if Shakespeare is any good, but the man answers that Will writes poorly compared to the other. Shakespeare's suffering, then, "begins early with the desire for genius, before that genius manifest itself." (Castaldo, 2004, 101) Dream then decides to approach Shakespeare after he declared he "would give anything to have [Marlowe's] gifts, or more than anything to give men dreams, that would live on long after [he is] dead." (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 2, 4) Dream reiterates his exact requests, asking if that is really his will, using the pun between his name and "will". When Shakespeare answers affirmatively, the Lord of dreams leads him away and Gaiman leaves the reader to infer what is going to happen between the two. The bargain Dream proposes to the Bard leads him to the conclusion that "[t]o become *that* Will, the one who writes great plays, Shakespeare must give up his will and become a conduit for stories that exist outside of him and outside of time." (Castaldo, 2004, 102) The next two episodes in which Shakespeare appears are *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, issue 19 of Volume 3, and *The Tempest*, issue 75 and significantly the last of the whole series.

## CHAPTER II: THE STORIES

True, I talk of dreams,  
Which are the children of an idle brain,  
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy,  
Which is as thin of substance as the air,  
And more inconstant than the wind who woos  
Even now the frozen bosom of the north  
And being angered puffs away from thence,  
Turning his side to the dew-dropping south.  
(Shakespeare, 2000, I.4.94-1021)

### 2.1. The land of the Dreaming: an introduction to *The Sandman's* universe

#### 2.1.1. The Endless

Before analysing *The Sandman's* story, the next paragraph will describe the Endless, the family of divine beings who primarily sets events in motion inside the graphic novel. These beings are not gods, but rather anthropomorphic representations of fundamental human ideas or functions. As their family name suggests, they were created at the beginning of time, before the appearance of gods and humans and will inhabit this universe until the end of everything:

There are seven beings, that aren't gods. They existed, before humanity dreamed of gods and will exist long after the last god has gone. They are – more or less – embodiments of the forces of the universe. They are named – in order of age – Destiny, Death, Dream, Destruction, Desire, Despair and Delirium (who was Delight before). That is all you need to know. (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 7, Foreword)

The order of creation Gaiman gave to the Endless is not random: rather, it follows the evolution of life since its very first instants. Therefore, Destiny is the first and eldest of the Endless, as his own nature requires him to be born before the universe itself. Everything follows the path Destiny has written for it. Right after Destiny comes Death, because all the things that are born must necessarily die, and then Dream, as all creatures have the ability to imagine and dream. From dreams springs change, embodied by Destruction, who is the representation of the violent end everything has to face in order to evolve. The other three siblings are more related to the subjectivity of each living creature: Desire represents cravings of all forms, not necessarily sexual, and doesn't have a specific gender; the others use "brother-sister" or "uncle-aunt" to refer to him-her (for example in Gaiman, 2019, vol. 6, 7; Gaiman, 2018, vol. 7, 1). Desire has a twin-sister, Despair, who personifies the deepest lack of hope, ambition and possibilities. The youngest of the Endless is Delirium, a young girl who represents the purest form of chaos, lacking any mental structure and logic. In the fourth volume of the graphic novel, *Season of Mists*, Gaiman inserts a little presentation for each sibling, except for the self-exiled Destruction. A full page is divided into two panels, each of them dedicated to one description. The couples who emerge from the structure of the page do not follow a chronological order: Desire and Despair are indeed coupled, but then Destiny is matched with Delirium, and Dream is paired up with Death. Gaiman may be trying to underline the particular relationship between these couples, suggesting similarities behind this apparent opposition: there is a thinner line between desire and anguish, knowledge and folly, dream and death than is generally believed.

Each Endless owns a distinctive sigil, an object symbolising their role and through which they can be summoned by another sibling or represented in the graphic novel: Destiny's sigil is the old, heavy book that is chained to his wrist; Death wears an Ankh as a necklace, an Egyptian symbol representing,

significantly, life; Dream has a helm, which he wears into battle as one of his tools of power; Destruction's sigil was a sword; Desire has a glass heart; Despair wears a ring with a hook which she frequently uses to cut her own flesh; Delirium's sigil is a swirl of colours. All the Endless siblings have a specific realm they belong to, which does not bind to time and space but is their own physical continuation. Due to their peculiar nature, none of them is at ease in the realm of another sibling, except Death, the reason probably being she belongs to everything that has a life: "Dream respect his brother, but the garden of Destiny disturbs him. It is usual, however, for the Endless to feel uncomfortable in each other's realms; only Death travels wheresoever she must, without misgiving." (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 4, 7) An Endless and its realm are tied by a symbiotic bond that almost makes the two entities a single being: thus, to enter a realm that is not one's own can provoke a certain discomfort.

Destiny, the first of the Endless, is usually portrayed as a tall man, with his face hidden by a long, plain robe and with his book firmly chained to his wrist, as a symbol of inscrutable and inescapable fate. His description reports:

There are some who believed him to be blind; whilst others, perhaps with more reason, claim that he has travelled far beyond blindness, that indeed, he can do nothing but see: that he sees the fine traceries the galaxies make as they spiral through the void, that he watches the intricate patterns living things make on their journey through time. Destiny smells of dust and the libraries of night. He leaves no footprint. He casts no shadow. (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 4, 1)

He is the most reserved and detached of the siblings, probably because he can only read his book and not write it: he has no agency over it, no power to change what has been written on its pages. "Destiny has no path of his own.

He makes no decision, picks no branching ways; his way is laid out, drawn and defined, from the beginning of time to the end of everything.” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 4, 1) Even though he has no control over his own story, this does not affect other people’s fates, as his realm exemplifies: a garden of intricate and never-ending paths, a labyrinth where living things can decide freely which road to follow. Lost and seized opportunities create a web so tangled that not even Destiny himself seems to know it with certainty: “The paths diverge and branch and reconnect; some say not even Destiny himself truly knows where any way will take you, where each twist and turn will lead.” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 4, 1)

Gaiman’s Death defies the widespread literary imaginary of the audience: generally thought as a male character by Anglophone countries (more on this in Guthke, 1999, 7 – 37), here Gaiman portrays her as an extremely cute, very pale young woman, and dressed in modern casual black clothes. When asked about his decision to depict her as a woman, he stated:

Death really became female because I wanted to fuck with the innate sexism of language up front. I just loved the idea. Language is sexist. You may fight this or you can get it to work with you. I loved the idea of announcing to the world that the Sandman was Death’s younger brother and knowing that no one would say, “Oh, then Death is his older sister.” [...] I was just playing with against the reader expectation and also because most literary incarnation of Death had been male. (Schweitzer, 2007, 64-5)

Her role makes her the scariest and most hated of the Endless to mortal eyes. Nonetheless, she has a strong, cheerful and ironic character, which Gaiman justified: “She gets to see everybody, on a daily basis. She’s out there personally meeting everyone. I really didn’t want a brooding Death. I didn’t want a Death who agonised over her role in life. I figure that by this point, she’d have gotten used to it. But then she found out she was perky.”

(Schweitzer, 2007, 64) Her beautiful appearance and her friendly, caring and optimistic attitude instantly clicked with the public. She has become one of the most beloved characters in the DC Universe that she is now in a spin-off graphic novel of her own (*Death: The High Cost of Living*, 1993). Her job is the hardest amongst the Endless and she takes it very seriously:

I'm not blessed, or merciful. I'm just me. I've got a job to do and I do it. Listen: even as we're talking, I'm there for old and young, innocent and guilty [...]. For some folks death is a release, and for others death is an abomination, a terrible thing. But in the end, I'm there for all of them. (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 4)

Dream is portrayed as an extremely pale, tall and moody man, who always wears clothes as dark as his hair and eyes. Gaiman thus describes him in *Season of Mists*:

Ah, there's a conundrum. [...] Dream accumulates names to himself like others make friends; but he permits himself few friends. [...] Of all the Endless, save perhaps Destiny, he is most conscious of his responsibilities, the most meticulous in their execution. Dream casts a human shadow, when it occurs to him to do so. (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 4, 1)

Morpheus's human shadow probably refers to the origin of dreams, intimately connected to the human unconscious and imagination: dreams are projections or shadows of the mind. The strong accent on the weight of responsibilities the protagonist feels foreshadows its crucial role in the story. Dream's character is the perfect counterbalance to his sister Death, with whom he is extremely close. This relationship is highly important, compared to the cold or even conflictual relationships he has with other Endless: Death's light-hearted though determined behaviour encourages Dream to connect with his most human part, to reflect and act accordingly, and sometimes even to make up for his own mistakes.

Morpheus's domain is called the Dreaming; it is the one described in most detail in the graphic novel, and also the most elaborate amongst the other realms. It is also the only one inhabited by other figures, besides Dream himself. The first glimpse the reader has of it is in the very first volume, *Preludes and Nocturnes*, where a devastated castle towers over a land in ruin. (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 1, 2) In fact, as the realms are mirrors of Endless' physical and psychological condition, during Dream's seventy-two year-long imprisonment, his kingdom suffered severe and ruinous damages. Its laws and borders start to dismantle, some of its inhabitants run away from it, while others gradually deteriorate with it. Once Dream regains his strength and power, he is able to rebuild the Dreaming easily, as his powers inside it are nearly limitless. In Dream's words, the Dreamworld

is infinite although it is bounded on every side. The way to the center is a slow spiral. One passes the Houses of Mystery and Secret – old way stations on the frontiers of nightmare. From there on charts a course nightward until one reaches the Gates of Horn and Ivory. I carved them myself, when the world was younger, and order was needed. (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 1, 2)

The Houses of Mystery and Secrets are the antechamber of the Dreaming itself and are guarded by the brothers Cain and Abel. These are not original characters, but Gaiman borrows them from two old series of DC comics, respectively *The House of Mystery* and *The House of Secrets*. (Bender, 1999, 244) The reference to the Biblical figures is straightforward, also because in the graphic novel one of Cain's duties is to perpetrate his brother's murder eternally. The access to the Dreaming is prevented by two gates, one made of horn and the other of ivory, already present in Homer's *Odyssey* (2017, book 19, v. 563 – 569) and Virgil's *Aeneid* (2007, book 6, v. 893 – 898). They share the same features: "the dreams that pass through the gates of ivory are lies, figments, and deceptions. The other admits the truth." (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 1, 2) Three creatures guard the gates: a wyvern, a gryphon and a winged horse.

At the centre of the Dreaming stands Dream's Castle, his abode: sometimes it appears as a royal palace with a bold architecture (Figure 1), other times as a gothic fortress (Figure 2). Other creatures populate the Dreamworld, but three are the most important: Lucien is the keeper of the Library, handyman and counsellor of Dream and also former raven transformed into human; Fiddler's Green is a place, a legendary land that sailors hope to reach in the afterlife, but it usually takes the features of an affable and old-fashioned old man; Matthew is an ironic, irreverent, straightforward raven and Dream's messenger, who can cross between worlds to gather information for or to bring it to his boss. The population inhabiting the Dreaming highlights one of Dream's peculiar characteristics: though mysterious and lonely, Morpheus is unable to stand the loneliness every Endless is destined to and decides to fill his realm with creatures that will share eternity with him. In *Bender*, Gaiman describes exactly this need, saying that "fundamentally, he likes the company. I always assumed the Sandman spent millions of years in a version of the Dreaming completely on his own; and I think he quite enjoys the alternative of having others around – though he'd never admit it." (1999, 52)

The most enigmatic figure amongst the Endless siblings is Destruction. Gaiman does not say much about the character except that Destruction left his role about three hundred years ago. It's only in volume 7, *Brief Lives*, that he appears as an active character inside the story and reveals a jolly, kind and cheerful temperament. Destruction embodies change, and though this can frequently be violent and painful, it is necessary for a new rebirth and thus inevitable. The reasons behind his giving up are never revealed until volume 7, as nothing is said about the consequences that his leaving brought on the universe. Few clues are scattered around in *Brief Lives*, and we deduce that he probably left his realm around the age of the Enlightenment, when mortals turned to reason and logic to interpret the world:



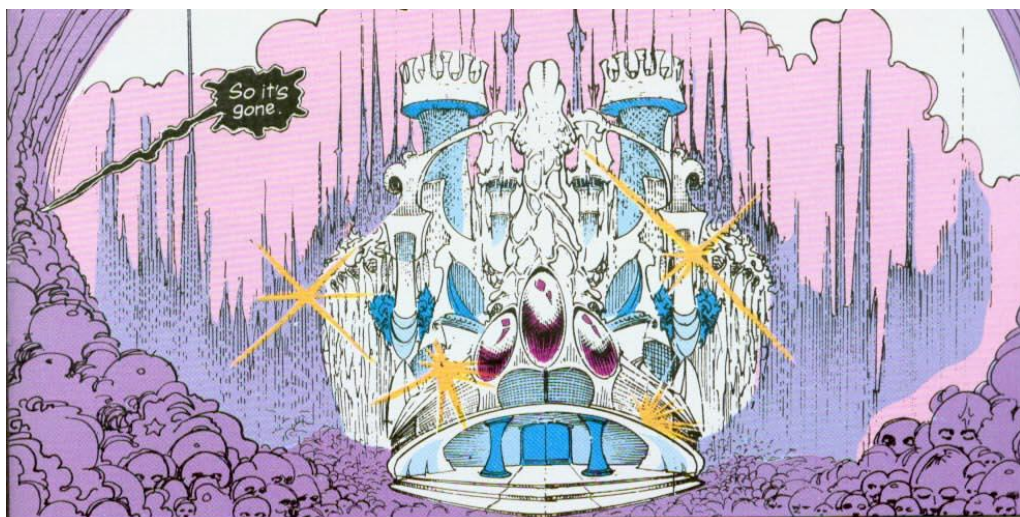


Figure 1 – Gaiman, 2018, vol. 1, 2



Figure 2 – Gaiman, 2018, vol. 9, 2

Times are changing, my brother. [...] They are using reason as a tool. Reason. It is no more reliable a tool than instinct, myth or dream. But it has the potential to be far more dangerous, for them. [...] After a while certain ideas become inevitable. [...] And from that follows the flames... the big bang. The loud explosions. [...] Then follows my time, broche. The age of fire and flame... (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 7, 4)

When finally Dream and Delirium manage to find their brother after a long search, Destruction at last explains that his responsibilities and the sense of guilt he felt for his own existence and job were a far greater burden than he could carry and thus decided to leave, even though he knew that “nothing new can exist without destroying the old.” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 7, 4) However, Destruction’s absence seems not to have had a massive impact on the universe, and the only visible consequences are his freedom, mortals’ taking responsibilities for their ruinous actions and maybe a bit more chaos: “Destruction did not cease with my abandonment of my realm, no more than people would cease to dream should you abandon yours. Perhaps it’s more uncontrolled, wilder. Perhaps not. But it’s no longer anyone’s responsibility.” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 7, 8) Thus, Destruction’s choice is paramount in giving back to humans control over their lives: “The Endless are echoes of darkness, and nothing more. We have no right to play with their lives, to order their dreams and their desires.” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 7, 8) The meeting with Destruction thus enables Gaiman to analyse in depth his idea of mythological beings as subject to humans’ will and imagination that will be later discussed in Chapter 3.

Desire appears the most immature of the siblings, probably because of its own nature: treacherous, malicious, often cruel and uninterested in situations or feelings of its relatives and of mortals, it does not hesitate in manipulating others to reach its purposes. It nullifies reason and pushes beings to unthinkable actions. Desire ignores (or probably denies) the

profound human nature of the Endless, and acts with superiority towards mortals: it has no qualms. Dream tries to talk some sense into it:

Desire, listen to me carefully. Remember this. We of the Endless are the servant of the living – we are NOT their masters. WE exist because they know, deep in their hearts, that we exist. When the last living thing has left this universe, then our task will be done. And we do not manipulate them. If anything, they manipulate us. We are their toys. (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 2, 7)

Unfortunately, Desire is a fleeting being, and listens only to its heart. That is probably the reason why its realm is a gigantic statue of Desire itself, made of flesh and blood and called “The Threshold” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 2, 1): the only inhabited part of the massive cathedral is, tellingly, the heart, commonly thought of as the organ dedicated to irrationality and feelings. The Threshold symbolises the idea that Desire “always live[s] on the edge” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 2, 1), it is unstable and uncertain. Furthermore, this specific Endless “casts two shadows: one black and sharp-edged, the other translucent and forever wavering, like heat haze” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 4, 1), precisely to underline on one hand its ambiguity and on the other its all-embracing nature. Desire’s physical appearance reflects its role:

[it] is of medium height. It is unlikely that any portrait will ever do Desire justice, since to see her (or him) it to love him (or her) – passionately, painfully, to the exclusion of all else. [...] Never a possession, always the possessor, with skin as pale as smoke, and eyes tawny and sharp as yellow wine: Desire is everything you ever wanted. Whoever you are. Whatever you are. Everything. (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 4, 1)

Completely in opposition to Desire, its twin sister Despair is far more unpleasant: “her skin is cold; her eyes are the colour of the sky, on the grey, wet day that leach the world of colour and meaning; her voice is little more than a whisper; and while she has no odour, her shadow smells musky, and

pungent, like the skin of a snake. [...] Despair says little, and is patient.” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 4, 1) Gaiman imagines Desire and Despair as twins because they both represent the most violent emotions a human heart can feel: Despair means complete annihilation of any hope, a total absence of will to act in a situation, and therefore she is the perfect mirror of Desire’s passion and pleasure. Gaiman gives little information to the reader about this Endless, but he describes her kingdom, an empty grey space filled with void and silence: “It is said that scattered through Despair’s domain are a multitude of tiny windows, hanging in the void. Each window looks out onto a different scene, being, in our world, a mirror. Sometimes you will look into a mirror and feel the eyes of Despair upon you, feel her hook catch and snag on your heart.” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 4, 1)

The youngest of the Endless is Delirium, whom Gaiman portrays as a young woman with multicoloured hair, eyes of different colours and dressed in gaudy clothes. She is the ficklest amongst her siblings, as she demonstrates by changing clothes and hairstyles from panel to panel: her nature imposes her neither to have rules nor to follow an order. Her realm reflects this instability and it is presented as a swirl of colours, forms, images and words, far from any human understanding: “her realm is close, and can be visited; however, human minds were not made to comprehend her domain, and those few who have made the journey have been incapable of reporting back more than the tiniest fragments.” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 4, 1) Delirium has an extremely emotional but cheerful character, and sometimes she can come across as childish in her odd freedom, though this does not necessarily make her happy. Her transformation from Delight to Delirium is not described in the graphic novel, however Gaiman tries to suggest a possible explanation to the reader: perhaps, when she became aware of change as an intrinsic characteristic of the universe, of her brother Destruction’s necessary presence in the world and of the limits of the Endless themselves, she lost her early

innocence and her mental stability. She acquired far more knowledge about reality than she could handle, and this overflowing abundance started the process of transformation into Delirium.

### **2.1.2. The plot**

*The Sandman* has the peculiar feature of holding together multiple universes and stories into a single graphic novel. There are tales and entire issues where Dream is completely absent, while in other issues the main plot focuses and revolves around his maturation. This paragraph attempts to greatly summarise the vast universe of *The Sandman* for the purpose of this dissertation.

The story begins in medias res. The reader finds Morpheus trapped on Earth by a human, Roderick Burgess, and his occultist sect, The Order of Ancient Mysteries. (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 1, 1) Burgess' original intent was to capture Death to obtain immortality. However, during the imprisoning ritual, something went wrong and it is Dream who remains locked down in a basement for the next seventy-two years. During this period, the Dreaming suffers considerable damages, while on Earth some people fall ill with a "sleeping sickness" (Gaiman, 20018, vol. 1, 1) that forces them into an eternal slumber and prevents them from ever waking up. Amongst these people, a young girl, Unity Kinkaid, is left under the care of a nursing home and she keeps on growing during her sleep. Nonetheless, during this period she is mysteriously raped and gives birth to a baby girl, who is put up for adoption. Years go by, Roderick Burgess dies and is replaced by his son Alex, who inadvertently sweeps away part of the magical circle that kept Dream imprisoned and the Lord of Dreams, finally able to escape, seeks his revenge on the Burgess'. Once back to his domain, Morpheus finds his castle in ruins

and some of the creatures that live in his realm (especially nightmares) at loose. On Earth, during his imprisonment, his nightmares Brute and Globe built an alternative, false Dreaming inside a child's mind, Jared Walker: he had been adopted by a couple who needed the allowance money but despised the child and kept him in their basement. Jed, to run away from his horrible reality, spent most of his time inside the false Dreaming. Brute and Globe also trapped inside it the soul of Hector Hall, a former DC superhero (Bender, 1999, 54), and of his pregnant wife, Hippolyta Hall. In the false Dreamland, Hector becomes a parody of the real Sandman, more and more losing touch with reality, and Lyta keeps her pregnancy on hold for more than two years, as she gets more and more lost in her illusion. Dream liberates the kid and punishes his nightmares, while dissolves Hector, as a ghost soul cannot walk mortal land, and leaves Lyta alone, claiming her child as his own, for she spent most of her pregnancy inside a dream. (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 2, 3)

The Furies (or the Kindly ones, as they prefer to be called) visit Destiny in his realm and prompt him to summon a family reunion. When the Endless meet, Desire provokes Dream as he recalls his brother's relationship with Nada, a human being, who, ten thousand years before, refused his love to protect her people from the consequences of that same relationship, forbidden by ancient laws even the Endless had to abide by. Morpheus, deeply hurt, damns Nada to Hell for eternity, and Desire remarks upon his brother's immaturity and selfishness that brought him to curse the woman with this cruel and unjust punishment. Death shares Desire's considerations and scolds Dream: the latter, deeply unsettled by their words, decides to end Nada's sufferings and descend to Hell, aware that this will mean defying Lucifer's authority. However, once there, he faces an empty Hell: the infernal Lord has chosen to leave his duty, as he is certain to have already atoned for his rebellion against God. Dream follows Lucifer to the borders of Hell to close every gate and discovers that Nada was set free like every other

damned soul, and no one knows her whereabouts. At last, Lucifer Morning Star hands the keys to Morpheus, leaving him to decide who is going to take his place. Dream welcomes the mythological entities interested in controlling the hellish estate in his Castle but finds himself unable to choose amongst them. He ultimately receives unexpected aid when the Creator of Hell himself agrees upon investing with the honour two angels sent there to guard the transaction, Duma and Remiel. (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 4, 6) As he escorts the former pretenders to the doors of his Castle, Dream answers to the Norse god Loki's desperate request, who accompanied Odin in his travel. He is looking for a way out from his punishment, which binds him to great sufferings at the centre of the earth. Morpheus allows him to escape, replacing Loki with a copy, on condition that the Norse god owes him a favour. (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 4, 6)

Destruction's absence is felt differently by all the Endless siblings, but Delirium misses him particularly as there has always been a tight relationship between the two. She decides to venture out to find him and asks Dream to go with her. The Dream Lord accepts, though he already knows Destruction has erased his traces and set up ploys to prevent anyone from going after him. However, the blood trail they leave on their journey is much worse than he expected: whoever helps Delirium and Dream, whoever knew Destruction and can somehow reveal his whereabouts is forced to flee or is killed. Morpheus cannot cope with the idea of so many lives lost and decides to quit, leaving his angry sister who locks herself up inside her realm in deep disappointment. Once again, Death talks some sense into Dream and convinces him to make peace with their younger sister, and after that the two decide to restart their search, only this time they consult Destiny first. The eldest Endless claims that the only one who can find Destruction is an oracle, but this one has to be part of the family in order to know something about one of its members: the only option seems to be Orpheus, son of Dream and the Greek muse Calliope. The relationship between father and son had

deteriorated centuries earlier, as Morpheus refused to help him descend to the underworld and recover his beloved Eurydice. Further, when the Bacchantes tore him to pieces, Dream refused to kill Orpheus, leaving his floating and still breathing head to the cares of some ministers in a small sanctuary: his son is still there, waiting for someone to give him a merciful death. Dream knows the price he will have to pay for this meeting, and nonetheless accepts to speak to him. As expected, Orpheus asks his father to kill him once and for all after he has delivered his information, and Dream has to give in to his request. To murder a member of the Endless' family is to break one of the most ancient rules of the universe: although it was Orpheus himself to demand his death, Dream knows he is going against the law and that his act is going to unleash the anger of the Kindly ones.

Meanwhile, on Earth, Hippolyta Hall's son, Daniel, mysteriously disappears. Lyta has not forgotten Dream's words about her son belonging to him, and immediately blames the Endless for her son's disappearance. However, it was not Dream who kidnapped the kid, but Loki with the help of the fairy Puck. Dream understands their mischief and sends his raven Matthew to look for them. In the meantime, Loki and Puck knock on Lyta's door as two police officers who are investigating on Daniel's case and they show her a picture of the kid's burnt body: devastated by the news, the woman falls into a trancelike journey between dream and reality that takes her in front of the Furies. Lyta asks them to fight against and win over Morpheus. On her ecstatic journey she finally lands on the Dreaming, where she realises Daniel is not dead: Matthew (with the help of the Corinthian, one of Dream's nightmares) managed to rescue him, taking the kid to the Castle under Dream's protection. Unfortunately, nothing can stop the Kindly ones once they have set their revenge in motion. Dream can only watch his Castle being ripped down: his only choice is to face them. Before doing so, he speaks to the young Daniel. Death rushes to his brother's aid and easily chases the



Kindly ones away. Morpheus and Death have a confrontation and he decides to take his sister's hand and accepts his own destruction.

At the Dream Lord's funeral wake, most of the characters inside *The Sandman* are present: dreamers and creatures of the Dreaming, mortals and immortals, divine beings and fairies, from all places and all times, they come to bid farewell to Morpheus in his realm. At the same time, inside the Castle, Daniel loses his child form and takes upon himself the role of new Lord of Dreams, as he becomes the new Dream of the Endless.

## 2.2. *A Midsummer Night's Dream: The Sandman #19*

As aforementioned in the previous chapter, Gaiman built *The Sandman* as a massive study around the idea of storytelling, about the construction of stories, their reception and their function, and at the same time he gave primary focus to the concept of authorship, its implications and consequences. This overview on some of the characters and on the general plot serves as an introduction to two stories inside the graphic novel where Shakespeare appears as a character and helps the readers untangle the threads connecting authorship and storytelling. What Gaiman is trying to do is to give the reader an insight on what it means to be a writer: he raises the curtain of a theatre and starts describing to his audience what happens in the backstage.

Issue 19, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is the third narrative inside Volume 3 of the graphic novel, *Dream Country*. (Gaiman, 2018, vol.3) The first page opens with a date, June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1593: Shakespeare with his theatrical company and his son Hamnet are travelling through the British countryside to find a place where they can perform his new play. A dark figure stands over the group, looking at them from a hill. Hamnet spots the man, and Shakespeare draws near him, as he knows he is Dream, who is waiting for him. The Endless reveals they are standing on Wendel's Mound, on the Sussex Downs, and that this will be the company's stage for the play. After a bit of dialogue between Shakespeare and Dream, it is established that the success of the play is very important for both of them. Shakespeare then goes to his troupe and urges them to put on their costumes and be ready for the performance. Gaiman shows us some behind-the-scene chattering, and then the action returns to Dream, who turns to the hill, demanding it to "open [its] door". (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3) Morpheus directly addresses the Long Man of Wilmington, an actual archaeological site in England, where the outline of a

giant, stylised man holding two sticks is represented on the side of the hill. In response to Dream's command, "the white-chalked figure comes alive, pulls open a door, and lets the fairies through into our world." (Bender, 1999, 78) Titania and Auberon make their entrance at the head of a variegated group of fairy beings, and they look elegant, regal and perfect, in stark contrast with Shakespeare's company of dirty rabble. (Figure 3) At the bottom of page 5, just underneath the royal group entrance, the caption reads "written by Neil Gaiman, with additional material taken from the play by William Shakespeare". (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3) This reference to the primary importance of the Bard's text, as the lines quoted from it have two different functions, as explained in Bender: "they either convey major beats of the plot, helping readers understand what [is] going on; or they in some way comment on the themes of [the] story, or of *Sandman* in general". (1999, 79) Dream welcomes the Fairies, the reader is introduced to Robin Goodfellow, Auberon's loyal henchman, and, at page 7, the play begins. Shakespeare plays king Theseus, who is the first to enter the stage, and suddenly realises his audience is not what he has expected. Page 7 (figure 4) opens with a huge panel at the top, which perfectly encloses all the characters of the story: there is a close up on the back of the fairies, and the eye of the reader, through a game of perspective, is driven towards the centre of the stage, where a startled Shakespeare freezes in front of his audience and does not utter a word, highlighted by a blank word balloon with just three dots in it. At the left bottom of the same page, a close up on Dream's face reveals his anxious and nervous feelings towards the play. Furthermore, as Shakespeare starts reciting his lines, a word balloon appears in Dream's panel with the quote "the pale companion is not for our pomp" (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3), to reinforce the distinction between magical creatures and mortals. From page 8 onwards, pages are constructed on four layers of simultaneous action from which the reader moves back and forth. The first layer represents the play being performed onstage; the second portrays what happens in the



Figure 3 – Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3





Figure 4 – Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3

backstage; the third is the reaction of the first row of the audience, which includes Dream, Auberon, Titania and Robin Goodfellow; the fourth includes the reactions of the back rows of the audience, composed of various fairies and, in particular, the giant Bevis, the tree spirit Peaseblossom, and the goat-woman Skarrow. This last layer in particular has an informative function, it is constructed to deliver to the reader some basic information on the play through the chattering between the fairy creatures. The layout of the panels reflects this structure, as most of the pages begin and end with the performance onstage, and the middle sections are dedicated to either the backstage or the audience. Page 9 shows the reaction of one of the actors, unsettled by their peculiar audience, as he tries to talk to Will about it. Then the action cuts to a scene where Auberon is caressing his animalesque Puck, who hungers to go out and play with the mortals. In the bottom panel of the page, the fairies are laughing for a line of the play, and this also breaks the tension that was built throughout the pages. Gaiman manages to make his readership emotionally involved, and the reader finally feels relieved when the fairies laugh, as that moment shows they are enjoying the performance and therefore both Dream and Shakespeare are successful in their intentions. Page 11 depicts a conversation between Dream and Titania, where the fairy Queen seems very interested in Hamnet, who is playing the Indian boy onstage, and asks the Endless about the child. Together with Puck's restless behaviour, this moment upholds another meeting point between the original play and the graphic novel, as Titania very much exhibits the same hunger to control the child as the Shakespearean Titania. It further foreshadows the encounter between the two worlds, magical and mortal. As a matter of fact, Dream has asked Shakespeare to call an interval halfway through the play, which marks the turning point of the issue, because when the actors meet the fairies the action changes radically. Page 15 and page 16 describe the intermission: Robert Burbage, one of the actors, asks Auberon for the crew's reward for the performance and the magical king, greatly amused, hands

him over a pouch full of gold coins; Puck follows his human counterpart in the backstage and takes his place, as he says “You played me well, mortal. But I have played me for time out of mind. And I do Robin Goodfellow better than anyone” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3); Titania approaches Hamnet and starts sweet-talking the child about going with her to the fairy lands. At the same time, Dream takes Will aside and congratulates on the success of the play: the reader learns for the first time what bargain the two have struck in issue 13, *Men of Good Fortune*. The Endless then reveals to him, with an impassive and cold tone, that Kit Marlowe was found dead some weeks before. Shakespeare is shocked by the news and reproaches him for the careless way he told him that. This exchange shows how the pre-imprisonment Dream cared little about humans and how much this fact has changed after seventy-two years of lockdown. When the play starts again, Auberon announces to Dream that the fairies are going to leave the Earth and withdraw to their enchanted land for good. In the meantime, Hamnet tries to talk to his father about the tales Titania told him once in the backstage, but Will is too focused on watching his actors play to pay him any attention: in the next panel, Robin Goodfellow recites the line “Lord, what fools these mortals be!” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3), which highlights human beings’ blindness, which prevents them from recognising the important things. At page 19 Dream for the first time in the graphic novel doubts his own action: he wonders whether he has done the right thing striking a bargain with Shakespeare, if the man understood what that would entail and whether Will would have accepted had he known about it. However, all of his doubts are met by a distracted Titania, who comments on the beauty of the play instead of answering to his hesitation. Then, on page 21, Dream finally reveals why he has commissioned this play to William: he wanted to leave to mortals a trace of the existence of the Faerie folk after their leaving, to make them immortals in the only way humans know how: through words. Auberon thanks Dream, though the fairy king asserts that “this diversion,

although pleasant, is not true". (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3) Dream replies: "Oh, but it IS true. Things need not have happened to be true. Tales and dreams are the shadow truths that will endure when mere facts are dust and ashes, and forgot." (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3) His remark is also echoed by the last panel of the page, where Shakespeare as Theseus, while watching the Rude mechanicals play, recites his lines: "The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them." (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3) Page 22 and 23 constitute the coda of the story: Dream bids farewell to all the Faerie folk except for Puck, who is left alone to finish up the play. Once Wendel's gate is open, a flash of light hits the stage, blinding the actors. Page 23 in particular consists of six progressing panels, showing Robin Goodfellow slowly giving up the human guise he wore to become a hobgoblin. Also, the night grows progressively darker with each panel, so that in panel 5 the only thing left is Puck's glittering eyes and teeth, and, in the last panel, total blackness. (Figure 5) The last page, in contrast with the darkness of the previous panels, opens to bright morning again. Shakespeare and the other actors wake up on the side of the hill and discover Auberon's gold has turned to a sachet of golden leaves. The others complain about being tricked, but Will scolds them, pointing that no other troupe "has played to such an audience." (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3) Hamnet runs to his father to tell him he had a marvellous dream about a lady who wanted him to go with her to magical lands, but Shakespeare cuts him off and starts listing the businesses of the day. The final panel of the whole story appears as a black lettering on an orange background, and recites: "Hamnet Shakespeare died in 1596, aged eleven. Robin Goodfellow's present whereabouts are unknown." (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3)

The issue has various different levels of reading and the focus here will be on the themes of rationality and love, of truth and reality in contrast to shadows and dreams and a discussion around love, responsibility and relationship.





Figure 5 – Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3

(Saxton, 2007, 22) In both the original Shakespearean play and in Gaiman's work, the setting is very prominent. In Shakespeare's play, two different realms can be distinguished. The first is the realm of the city, Athens, over which king Theseus rule: it represents rationality, order and logic, a place where people have to adhere to strict laws imposed by either the king or by a super-structural order. Theseus is the king of reality, cannot and does not want to believe in Fairies and quickly dismisses both Hermia's love case at the beginning of the play, and the lover's tale upon their return from the woods, as their story is "More strange than true, I never may believe / These antique fables, nor these fairy toys. / Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, / Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend / More than cool reason ever comprehends." (5.I.2-6) The city is also the place of daylight, which is connected to reason as it illuminates all things. Opposed to Athens is the wood, where Oberon, king of the Fairies, rules. The wood is associated with the night, as everything inside it happens after the twilight and Athenians describe those scenes as dreamlike: both Lysander and Demetrius cannot recall the events of the previous night spent in the woods, the former as he seems to have been "half sleep, half waking" (4.I.146) and the latter, when Theseus and his men enter the wood for the hunt and wake them, further questions: "This things seem small and undistinguishable, / Like far-off mountains turned into clouds. / [...] It seems to me that yet we sleep, we dream." (4.I.186-192) Nonetheless, Oberon's world is strange, a maze "where the unusual and the unnatural occur. Lovers change affections willy-nilly, hobgoblin play tricks, and mythical and legendary creatures [...] all walk the same Greek forest." (Saxton, 2007, 23) Although it is a realm of unpredictability, it is also the world of the lover, the poet and the lunatic, according Theseus words, and therefore a place of creativity and imagination: "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact." (5.I.7-8) Frye claims that

the wood-world has affinities with what we call the unconscious or subconscious part of the mind: a part below the reason's encounter with objective reality, and yet connected with the hidden creative powers of the mind. [...] It becomes [...] the world from which inspiration comes to the poet. (2008, 201)

The forest, hence, shares some characteristics with the Dreaming, Morpheus' kingdom. By Dream's own words, the Dreaming also takes up other names, such as "the Dreamtime" or "the Unconscious" and it is "as much part of [him] as [he] is part of it." (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 1, 2) The Dreaming also contains the greatest library ever existed, which consists of "every story that has ever been dreamed" and of "novels authors never wrote or never finished except in dreams." (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 4, 2) It is then the source of imagination, concepts and premises: thus Dream, as Prince of Stories, has the power to control the creative force of fiction. As Oberon's forest, it is strange and anything can happen inside it, even the most unusual and impossible things. In spite of some similarities, the Dreaming and the woods are not completely alike. Inside the forest, Oberon has power and control: however, this control is not absolute, but has boundaries. As a matter of fact, he has to resort to tricks and magic in order to defeat Titania and persuade her to give up her Indian boy. Furthermore, the fairy folk suffer no consequences for meddling with mortals. In Shakespeare's play, when Puck mistakes Demetrius for Lysander and pours the love potion into the eyes of the wrong man, Oberon tells him off but sends him to put things to right, and it all ends there. Fairies then

have no responsibilities to the human, especially the ones that are foolish enough to enter the woods at night, Bottom's head is transformed into that of an ass, and the lovers' affection become confused, yet the fault lies with mortals for being in the Fairy realm in the first place. (Saxton, 2008, 25)

On the contrary, the Dreaming never falls into chaos, it is always ordered and, as Dream talks about rules and responsibilities, then his kingdom is also bound to those laws and restrictions. Moreover, as aforementioned, Dream has to obey other “super-structural” rules, which organise the universe as a whole and are even older than the Endless themselves. His sense of accountability follows him not only in his realm, but also outside, in the outer world: much like the rules of Athens, these laws have to be complied with, no matter what. Furthermore, his strict code of conduct pushes him to pay his debts towards other people he owes, as his servants, or Shakespeare for writing the plays, or also his son, killing him in the end. He is a rational creature, and thus his realm ultimately combines the features of Oberon’s wood: creativity and rationality both coexist inside the Dreaming. Unfortunately, though, he cannot balance his rationality with another major theme of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: love. Inside the Shakespearean play, love falls arbitrarily, which means that even if lovers change their minds either willingly or because of the magic potion, their love is still love, it is not something less honourable or right than if it was spontaneous. Most importantly, though, love does not follow rationality. As Bottom says, “reason and love keep / little company together nowadays.” (3.I.136-137) For Dream, and thus inside the Dreaming, love and reason cannot walk together not because of the arbitrary nature of the former, but because Dream only follows the latter and does not take into account any other possibility. According to Bender,

the Sandman [...] comes across as someone who is very conscientious, capable and even self-sacrificing when performing his job; but he’s markedly deficient when it comes to handling people and relationships. (1999, 32)

In addition to his long list of failed love relationships, his greatest disappointment is the lost connection with his son. At Dream’s funeral wake,

his raven Matthew describes painstakingly well his self-isolation: "Nobody was close to your brother. Not unless you're talking about astronomical distances... y'know - the sun is close to Alpha Centauri... He... He wasn't very good at close." (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 2) Delirium tries to remind her brother that his responsibilities do not end with carrying out his duty, as "things [they] do make echoes. [...] [Their] existence deforms the universe. THAT's responsibility." (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 9, 8) However big his sense of honour is, it is not enough to reach out to and understand human emotions, as is clear from the way he behaves with Shakespeare. Even though he doubts his decision of making that bargain with Will, he still cannot sympathise with him, as the reader can see when Dream thoughtlessly informs him about Marlowe's death. Thus, although this shows respect towards mortals, he is unable to share their perspective on life. And though realising the truth behind Delirium's words, he cannot change his nature but knows he has to find someone who can. That is the reason why he makes preparations to bring about a new Dream, little Daniel, whose hybrid nature can create a bridge between mortals and magical creatures, who can understand humans and show them kindness, love and compassion. Shakespeare's play ends with the realm of love taking over the realm of reason, as all lovers are happily at peace and the Fairies dance above them to give them their blessing. The play's epilogue mirrors *The Sandman's* ending, as Daniel perfectly embodies both rationality and love.

### 2.3. *The Tempest: The Sandman* #75

Located at the end of volume 10, *The Wake*, issue 75, *The Tempest*, marks the closing chapter of the whole *Sandman* series. The very first page opens with an almost theatrical structure, as a ship is tossed by the waves during a storm and a couple of old-parchment-like caption boxes contain the opening lines of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. As a matter of fact, the reader immediately finds Will at work in the first panel of the same page, focused on writing at candlelight. From its very beginning, then, the story runs on two separate levels: one portrays the world outside Shakespeare and the other deals with what happens inside his own mind. The narrator balloon on the same panel sets the scene in November 1610 and in Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare's birthplace. His daughter Judith approaches him and the two start a conversation over his piece of writing. Shakespeare tells her he is writing a comedy and that this will be his last play. At some point his wife Anne interrupts them, scolds Will about putting nonsense inside their daughter's head and sends her to bed. Shakespeare then heads to the inn, where two unknown sailors carry inside a big bundle that makes everybody in the room turn. It smells horribly, and the two promise they are hiding the corpse of an Indian from the Bermudas, adorned with typical ornaments. Shakespeare carefully watches as they go around the room asking for some shillings for their little scene: he is already collecting new material for his play. When they put on their show and reveal the Indian, he leaves the inn and makes his way back home. On page 11, the reader gets a glimpse of Will's play, as a full-page panel shows parts of scene II, act 1, and also encloses three smaller panels where a concentrated Shakespeare is writing and receives the visit of his old friend Ben Jonson. Though Jonson is presented as an arrogant and conceited man, it is plain that Shakespeare holds him in great regard, as he presents him various doubts about his work and life. Jonson asks how the play is going and what sources Shakespeare has used this time: he provokes

Will by saying that he uses original material as he has “met all sorts of people... from the lowest to the most high. Thus, [he] understand[s] ‘em” (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6) while his friend has not and therefore does not have experience of it. But Shakespeare replies: “I would have thought that all one needs to understand people is to be a person. And I have that honour.” (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6) On page 14 and 15, as they walk through the town, they meet some children who are making preparations for the Bonfire Night. They discuss whether this celebration will be remembered in the future: Shakespeare starts composing and lets Jonson finish the famous traditional rhyme “Remember remember, the fifth of November” in order to “give them something they will not forget.” (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6) When Jonson asks him again what he is planning to do next, Will firmly replies that this will be his last play, but his friend insists that he is “born a playwright. It’s in [his] blood, and in [his] bones. [...] It will take the cold of death to tug the pen from [his] hand.” (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6) However, Shakespeare responds he “shall be pleased to put down [his] pen. Truly.” (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6) The panel portrays a close up on his face: his eyes are closed and around them runs a web of intricate wrinkles which extends to his forehead. He is visibly tired and much older than the young ambitious writer of issue 13 and 19. Again, page 17 shows Will’s imagination at work, as he writes about the witch Sycorax while she is imprisoning the spirit Ariel into a tree trunk. Judith once more interrupts his writing. She openly admits resentment over her father’s long absences in London during her childhood. Shakespeare tries to comfort her, reassuring her he will soon be done with his work. The scene changes: it is now December 1610, everything is covered by snow, and Will is fast asleep on his desk. Dream visits him in his sleep: Shakespeare complains about his old plays because he finds them dull, but Morpheus is more interested in his new one. The setting inside the dream changes and both characters are transported into a beach, on Prospero’s island, given the by animal-like spirits that surround them. Shakespeare tries to urge Dream to

explain why he wanted him to write precisely this play, but he answers vaguely, and the dream abruptly ends. After a two-page discussion with a priest about his translation of the Psalms and if it is God who infuses talent on artists, Will returns home and starts declaiming the last lines of his play to his wife, who, however, immediately brings him back to reality asking him to chop some wood. On page 29, while Shakespeare is writing the very last lines of the play, Dream appears beside him to free him from their bargain. However, Will does not want to part without an explanation and asks Dream for a glass of wine in his house so they can talk. Morpheus grants him his wish, and the two walk towards the Dreaming. During the walk, Shakespeare hears "the beating of mighty wings" (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6), probably a reference to Death and her kingdom, very close to the Dreaming. Once they get inside his Castle and Dream has poured a glass of wine for Shakespeare, the writer starts making some enquiries, the first of which is "Why did you give them to me? [...] The plays. The words. [...] Why me?" (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6) On panel 7 of page 32, a close up on a thoughtful Dream allows the reader to understand his doubts about the choice he made, as he replies: "Because you had a gift, and the talent. Because you were no worse a man than many another. Because you had a good heart. And because you wanted it... so much..." (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6) Finally, Will pressures Dream into answering why he commissioned this play as the second half of payment he owed to him. Dream's response serves as a guide to his motivation for the entirety of *The Sandman*: he believes he will never have the kind of story Prospero has; for him there is no escape from his life as king of a magical place outside reality. Dream thinks he can neither change nor possess a story of his own: "I am Prince of stories, Will; but I have no story of my own. Nor shall I ever. But I thank you." (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6) Shakespeare wakes up at his study desk and understands the magnitude of what has just happened: "It is over. [...] All of it. The burden of words. I can lay it down, now. Let it rest." (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6) All that



is left to write is the epilogue, the last lines of Prospero's speech. Page 38, the final page, appears as nine different panels, eight on top, all of the same size, and one bigger at the bottom. Parts of the speech run from panel to panel either into antique caption boxes, when a panel portrays a close up on Shakespeare's handwriting, or into speech balloons when the panel focuses on his face. The final panel depicts the papers where the play has just been written and the pen Will has used, laid flat on the desk, with some ink dripping from its tip. Four captions sum up what is going to happen to Shakespeare's family: Judith will marry poorly and live an unhappy life; Anne will die after the publication of the "First Folio"; and William Shakespeare will die on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1616, from an illness, but he will write no more solo plays after *The Tempest*. (Figure 6)

If the play in issue 19 mirrors events happening in the reality of the graphic novel, here the original text of *The Tempest* serves as an explicatory means to what the process of writing and storytelling is and what it entails for a writer, especially in terms of relationships with the outer world. The original Shakespearean play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was functional to issue 19, while in this story the other play provides a cross section of what happens inside Shakespeare's mind during his writing. Gaiman gives us a glimpse of Shakespeare's domestic life in Stratford, with his wife and daughter, away from the hustle and bustle of London. Again, the theme of relationships is prominent and the reader can see it not only through the conversations Will has with his family, but also with the people at the inn, with the priest, and with Ben Jonson. Gaiman depicts Shakespeare, and thus the writer in general terms, through the lenses of other people. He illustrates to the reader how the artist is perceived by others. The clients of the pub and the priest serve as an external point of view: they do not know Will intimately, but only through rumours and reports about his career and life in London. Both the clients, who represent the general crowd, and the priest, judge him not as a



Figure 6 - Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6

person, but only in terms of his work. On one hand, the crowd is almost scared of him, to the point one man calls him “the plague-crow” (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6), hence casting a negative light upon him. On the other, at the same time, the priest praises his translation of the Psalms and wishes he could be a poet as Shakespeare is. Thus, these two opposite but comparable reactions demonstrate the extreme behaviour of the audience, as people either cut off an artist as a whole, or revere him or her like a god. The meeting with Ben Jonson provides another point of view, and an example of two different ways of being a writer. Jonson, as portrayed by Gaiman, is almost overconfident, presumptuous, and gives unsolicited advice in a direct but very impolite way. He represents the writer as a celebrity, as someone who loves hearing the applause of the cheering crowd and does not understand any other way of living. By contrast, during their conversation, Will appears almost compliant, he passively accepts his friend’s opinion and even when he tries to reply, his counterarguments seem just faint attempts to justify his work and life. Shakespeare hence stands for the lone writer, as the artist who cannot be understood, not even by his own peers. The third relationship Gaiman inserts is with Will’s wife, Anne. She is eight years his senior, and after she got pregnant, they had a shotgun wedding to fix her reputation. (Bender, 1999, 227) Shakespeare returned to London for long periods to flee from his family obligations and now he has returned to Stratford to settle back in. The problem is that, after so many years away following his dreams, the relationship with Anne has deteriorated and they “have virtually nothing in common, nothing they can talk about.” (Bender, 1999, 227) A perfect example of the odd balance they created can be found in their exchange at page 27 and 28 (Figure 7a and b). A little back in the story, she had exhaustively remarked: “you know the trouble with you, Will? You live in words, not in the real world. You think too much. You dream too much.” (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6) Again, this is another moment in the graphic novel where two characters really don’t understand each other, as





Figure 7a - Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6

Figure 7b - Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6



both are inside their own worlds and cannot make them collide, as if they are speaking two different languages and couldn't communicate. Shakespeare's fundamental problem, according to Gaiman, is that "the cost of getting what you want is having what once you wanted. Here Shakespeare sits, with all the writing talent and achievements he craved in *Sandman* 13, in spades. But he no longer has any idea if those are the things he wants, because he's no longer the boy who wanted them." (Bender, 1999, 228) The conversations he has with his daughter Judith highlight and complicate this paradox even further. The first time Gaiman shows them together, father and daughter have a very tender moment, as he explains to her what his new play is about and she happily listens and rejoices for his work. It describes a moment of normal, daily life between them, as if their family was an ordinary one. Their second meeting, though, is not as sweet. Judith tells him she would have given the world for him to be someone else, to have him there with them as a family:

When I was a little girl and I saw a star falling – or when Hamnet and I would split the chicken-bone men call the merrythought – my wish was always that I had a father who was a smith, or a fletcher, or even a miller. [...] Why did you have to go to London? Why make up the plays? Why act? I warrant you could have found good, honest work in Stratford. [...] Did you not think? Did you not care? (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6)

When Shakespeare is confronted with the reason why he started writing or why he went to London to become a playwright, he cannot contrive an exhaustive reply. Completely helpless, the only answer he finds is: "I... followed a dream. I did as I saw best at the time." (Gaiman, 20109, vol. 10, 6) Once more, Gaiman underlines the idea of the writer as a loner, as someone who struggles to create bonds outside the world he has created inside his or her mind. In the next chapter, we will see how this idea is completely

overturned by the text itself and by Gaiman's own behaviour as a professional writer and his relationship with his readers.

## CHAPTER III: THE DREAM

All around me darkness gathers,  
Fading is the sun that shone;  
We must speak of other matters:  
You can be me when I'm gone.  
(Gaiman, 2019, vol. 9, 11)

### 3.1. Neil Gaiman and Postmodernism

Before diving into Gaiman's own facet of postmodernism, it is useful to provide a broad definition of the term. Although many scholars still debate whether it is correct to use this term, for the purposes of this dissertation it proves useful to stand by Brian McHale's analysis of this specific movement. According to McHale, the shift from modernism to postmodernism is due to a change in the concept of the dominant. (1987, 3 - 11) This dominant is identified by Jakobson as "the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components." (in McHale, 1987, 6) Therefore, this concept is plural: a text can have multiple dominants depending on the depth, purpose and target of the research. McHale identifies the dominant of modernist fiction as epistemological, which means that it has to deal with the question of knowledge and what humankind has to do with it. (1987, 6) Usually, the underlying questions of a modernist text are, for example, "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it? [...] What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it? [...] What are the limits of the knowable? And so on." (McHale, 1987, 9) Whereas, by contrast, the postmodernist dominant is ontological, hence all the focus is on the self and the concept of being, and existing. A postmodernist text undertakes the following inquiries:

Which world is this? What is to be done with it? Which of my selves is to do it? [...] What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how they are constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on. (McHale, 1987, 10)

The distinction between epistemological and ontological dominant is not as clear-cut as it seems, and usually one field slips into the other and vice versa. But the function of the dominant is to project an order between these field, and thus, in a postmodernist text, “epistemology is *backgrounded*, as the price for foregrounding ontology.” (McHale, 1987, 11) McHale noticed that postmodernism and the fantastic genre share many features, motifs and *topoi*, as they both are governed by the ontological dominant. (1987, 74) It is possible, then, to inscribe Gaiman in a postmodern perspective as he destabilises, delegitimises and revitalises many contemporary key concepts, such as myth, folklore, literature and pop-culture. He disrupts existing works into their component parts and employs those fragments to enrich and deepen his own writing, thus creating multiple layers of reality and other worlds which are so broad they include multiple points of view.

This chapter will analyse the postmodern implications of Gaiman’s poetics and will focus especially on his understanding of mythology, storytelling and worldbuilding.

### **3.1.1. “Believe Everything”: Gaiman’s mythology**

Gaiman has more than once professed an unconditional love for myths and mythologies:



Myths are compost. They begin as religions, the most deeply held of beliefs, or as the stories that accrete to religions as they grow. [...] And then, as the religions fall into disuse, or the stories cease to be seen as the literal truth, they become myths. And the myths compost down to dirt, and become a fertile ground for other stories and tales which blossom like wildflowers. (Gaiman, 2016, 56)

According to Gaiman, myths are the fundamental components for literary creation. His theory is not limited to one single mythology, but stretches to include every single mythological story or character: "there's a fluidity of belief in Neil Gaiman's work, fitting from one cultural tradition to another, and a willingness to embrace all feats of thought." (Alexander, 2007, 135) As a matter of fact, he uses this mythological structure, which can be called a sort of "absolute polytheism", in every work, and *American Gods* is a primary example, together with *The Sandman*. Both literary works include, at the same time, many of the mythological-religious pantheons humans have created, even legends and folk tales from minor cultures. Most of the time, he reunites under a unique form very different myths ascribable to the same symbolic value: "We travel through the Fair Lands, child. Call them Avalon, or Elvenhome, or Domdaniel, or Faerie, it matters not. It is the Land of Summer's Twilight." (Gaiman, 1991, 7) An excerpt from *American Gods* perfectly sums up Gaiman's religious understanding: "What should I believe? thought Shadow, and the voice came back to him from somewhere deep beneath the world, in a bass rumble: 'Believe everything'." (Gaiman, 2004, 134)

Dream takes on a different name and a different form according to the person he has in front of him, and this remarks the idea of a mythological concept underlying every belief. He is Oneiros when he meets Calliope, the Greek muse; Nada addresses him as Kai'ckul; Shakespeare does not know where to locate him in his personal religious range and tries to rationally

connect him to the pagan world, but Dream reassures him: "I am of your faith. I am of all faiths, in my fashion." (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6) What might seem contradictory becomes a harmonious fusion in Gaiman:

It is an inclusive religious structure. Everything is welcome. Nothing is untrue. All is true. In theory, you would think the whole structure would collapse under a neatly eroded suspension of disbelief. But in actual fact, it worked fairly well. (Gaiman in Elder, 2007, 78)

Gaiman hands back to the reader the power of choosing to believe whatever one wants: "there's no need to choose. [...] Belief in everything has the capacity to broaden our minds and -perhaps- bring on enlightenment." (Alexander, 2007, 139) Everything humanity believes becomes true, and this also applies to the Endless, who can actually die, despite their name, as Morpheus states more than once in *The Sandman*. In his introduction to *The Wake*, Mikal Gilmore wrote

With *Sandman*, Gaiman aimed to use a comics-based mythos to expand on, interact with and deepen classical legends of mythology and popular history. [...] It was as if you had discovered a timeless trove of fascinating lost legends and mysteries: [it] revealed how so many different people shared so many different patterns of fable and providence in their disparate histories of storytelling. (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, Introduction)

Gaiman chooses to depict inside *The Sandman* a mythological pantheon of divine beings who do not have a story of their own, in opposition, for example, to Norse or Greek gods, who have a chronological backstory of their life since their birth, most of the times even more than one version. Myths and folk tales are supposed to explain why the world is the way it is, and these stories have accompanied humankind since its origin. According to Gottschall, religion "is a human universal, present – in one form or another – in all of the societies that anthropologists have visited and archaeologists have dug up. [...] Religion is the ultimate expression of story's dominion

over our minds.” (Gottschall, 2012, 119) Gaiman claims he depicted the Endless as such in order to make them more universal and therefore to allow the readers to sympathise with them, no matter where they come from or how old they are. (Elder, 2007, 54 – 78) Through his vision, Gaiman gives to the human mind and to the human talent to imagine and believe a deep and fundamental power: to mould and create reality through narratives.

### **3.1.2. Storytelling: stories and metafiction**

The power bestowed to human imagination and belief represents another fundamental aspect of Gaiman’s writing: stories. To create stories is one of the oldest methods for humans to describe the world that surrounds them. Gottschall defines storytelling as a natural inclination of humankind, as humans try to impose the structure of stories on the chaos of existence to make sense of it. (2012, 1 – 19) Gaiman never tires of stressing how important stories are to us as humans. According to his view, stories are alive. As time passes, they grow, they can change and reproduce: they need people to do all these things. They are not self-sufficient but need human vectors in order to live. if stories do not change, they eventually die. (Long Now Foundation, 2020, 18:10)

People tell us stories. It’s an enormous part of what makes us human. We will do an awful lot for stories. We will endure an awful lot for stories. And stories, in their turn, like some kind of symbiont, help us endure and make sense of our lives. (Long Now Foundation, 2020, 29:52)

He then stresses that stories are born out of an act of imagination, usually as dreams. It is no surprise, then, that *The Sandman* is built as a story about stories. The whole series, with its 75 issues, builds a postmodern, self-

reflexive narrative that offers an insight into how meaning is created and organised through writing. Its protagonist himself is addressed as Prince of Stories, or Lord Shaper, pointing to his role as master creator of stories out of imagination and dreams. Waugh defines metafiction as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.” (1984, 2) Even if Gaiman uses metanarrative throughout all the series, the episodes featuring Shakespeare as a character are exemplary as they present a commentary on the figure of the writer, hence they “explore the *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction.” (Waugh, 1984, 2) Gaiman uses twice the tool of the play-within-a-graphic-novel (in issue 19, it is actually a play-within-a-play-within-a-graphic-novel) to surgically analyse his own job as a writer, throwing “slabs of mythology, fairy tale, and horror onto the autopsy table and cut[ting] into them like a mad scientist, turning them inside out to see how they are built.” (Dowd, 2007, 104) However, instead of casting a positive light upon his work, Gaiman seems to warn his readers not trust writers at all, because “writers are liars” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 1) and they are well aware of it: “We who make stories know that we tell lies for a living. But they are good lies that say true things, and we owe it to our readers to build them as best as we can.” (Gaiman, 2016, 26)

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Gaiman divides the story in four different “levels of action” (Sanders, 2006, 26): backstage, on stage, the front row, and the peanut gallery. Charles Vess, the illustrator, and Gaiman have worked together to make them as markedly recognisable as possible, and yet these levels resist separation. (Sanders, 2006, 28) They blur into each other, reflecting the same motives, roles and personalities from different angles. The distinction is characterised by a change of colouring which signals a progressive turn of daylight into night: the colours of the backstage are bright as if under the broad light of midday,

while, by contrast, twilight seems to have fallen upon the fairies in the peanut gallery, as they are surrounded by an almost night sky. (Sanders, 2006, 28)

The first area under scrutiny is the backstage. It is the realm of reality, of the everyday life of the actors, where they relate to each other and watch the audience from behind the stage. However, it is also where the actors transform into the characters they have to impersonate. It somehow anticipates the meeting between the fairies and humans, being the place where “the magic happens” as people take the guise of someone else. Here, the bright colours highlight the fact that this area belongs to the world of reality. (Sanders, 2006, 29) The second distinct level is the stage. This area is peculiar, as it holds together reality and fantasy: on one hand, the actors are real human beings, but on the other, there are pretending to be part of another fictional reality. Moreover, the situation is further complicated by the fact that the action onstage represents actual members of the audience and past events occurred to them. (Sanders, 2006, 31) The third area includes the royal figures of Dream, Titania and Auberon. Although none of the characters are human, this level is placed between the Faerie world and the mortals to indicate a certain amount of slippage between these worlds. It should be noted that the play concerns royalty watching a play put on by commoners, just as Dream and his fairy companions are watching a play put on by commoners. Titania, Auberon and the fairies are otherworldly beings who inhabit a different plane of existence, yet they are physically present in the human world of the actors. (Sanders, 2006, 33) Further, they are royalty and as such they inhabit a different social sphere than that of the actors. All this highlights that reality and fantasy, facts and fiction are significantly interconnected. The fourth and last area is the peanut gallery, where the fairies comment and chatter about the play and the royals. They represent the common man, despite their otherworldliness, and like the rude mechanicals in Shakespeare’s play, they provide much of the comic relief in

the issue. They are the general audience, and their use of colloquial language draws them closer to both the reader and the actors. And, like the reader, they are the furthest removed from the action: their presence blurs the distinction between the fictive reality of the graphic novel and the world of the reader, drawing one into the other whilst the reader is also witnessing the blurring of two distinct worlds within the text. (Sanders, 2006, 33) Then, realities that are initially distinct now overlap and invade one another. Moreover, the colouring scheme Vess used, with the backstage in bright daytime colours and the fairies in the dark of a magical twilight and then everything progressively turning into night, allows the reader to become aware first of the passage of time, and second of the human world drawing closer to the magical realm. (Sanders, 2006, 28) Ultimately, the two worlds finally collide and merge completely at page 23 as shown in Figure 5. Robin Goodfellow breaks the fourth wall and directly addresses the readers, as much as he does in the original Shakespearean play. As he recites his lines from the play, he seems not to address the audience in front of him, but Gaiman's audience, his readership: asking the fairy audience to amend him and his fellow actors, he is also asking the same to the readers, inscribing the whole issue in a dream-like state, as Shakespeare did in his play. This forces readers to question whether this whole story has actually happened. However, as Dream says, "things need not have happened to be true. Tales and dreams are the shadow-truths that will endure when mere facts are dust and ashes, and forgot" (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3), reinforcing Puck's previous comment on the play, "this is magnificent – and it is true! It never happened; yet it is still true." (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3) Both Dream's and Robin Goodfellow's statements in fact comment on the truthfulness of the literary creation, and they also call attention to another focal point of Gaiman's poetics: the presence of the audience. According to Gaiman, it is the audience who gives power to the stories: it is even more powerful than authors themselves, as in the audience resides the authority to choose whether a

story deserves to live or not. As Dowd points out, the audience “controls the story or, borrowing from Puck, they ‘amend’ it to their liking. Ultimately, the audience embodies the real engine of the storytelling experience.” (2007, 111)

*The Tempest*, instead, is an experiment to explore whether an author can exist in a vacuum. (Dowd, 2007, 113) If the whole issue depicts Shakespeare’s everyday life, it also intertwines bits and pieces of the original play into the narrative, not to comment on it but rather to show the audience the real nature of the literary creation process. All of Shakespeare’s attempts to make his wife listen to the lines he wrote, as he tries to create an audience for his play, fall on deaf ears, as Anne’s pragmatism and reluctance prevents her from paying attention to her husband’s nonsense fantasies. The passages from the play displayed in the issue, then, represent the author “as he tries to serve as his own audience, filling both the role of speaker and listener at the same time”, however “he cannot be both storyteller and audience no matter how hard he tries.” (Dowd, 2007, 113-114) As the reader witnesses Shakespeare’s process of writing, she or he becomes the listener of both the play itself and the author working on that same play. Further, as Shakespeare actually puts on paper his words, “he attempts to achieve communion with an audience and acknowledges that storytelling itself is an imaginative project that requires an intimate union between author and audience.” (Dowd, 2007, 114)

### **3.1.3. Worlds within worlds within worlds**

Gaiman thus elaborates metafiction so that it can serve the purpose of opening up new possible realities, and, according to McHale, he follows Rosemary Jackson in her description of the fantastic as dialogical, “an interrogation of the ‘real’ and of the monological forms of realistic

representation.” (McHale, 1987, 75) In his introduction to *Fragile Things*, a collection of short stories and poems, he explains his use of metafictional narratives:

One describes a tale best by telling the tale. You see? The way one describes a story, to oneself or to the world, is by telling the story. It is a balancing act and it is a dream. The more accurate the map, the more it resembles the territory. The most accurate map possible would be the territory, and thus would be perfectly accurate and perfectly useless. The tale is the map which is the territory. (Gaiman, 2006, 33)

In doing so, he blurs the distinction between fantasy and the “real” history, and also complicates his fantastic universe by making it accessible only through stories: mortals can enter the Dreaming only when sleeping, entering subconsciously through the realm of dreams, or when Morpheus, Lord of Stories, willingly opens the doors of his kingdom. Hence, the only way to access the fantastic is via imagination, or through a tool of the imaginative process (Dream himself). Each story told creates a different version of the universe that is “real” for the person who tells it, and it thus contributes to the plurality of visions inside reality itself. And if reality becomes a constellation of stories, then this problematises the idea of “real world” itself. If Tolkien clearly separated the primary creation (the world we live in) and the secondary (the world of the story), Gaiman erases this distinction, so that there is no primary creation in that sense. (Attebery in Casey, 2012, 120 – 121) This identity between first and secondary worlds provides another shared facet between the fantastic genre and postmodernism, as it complicates and deconstructs the concept of reality, making the reader question what is real and what is imaginary. As McHale states, the postmodernist fantastic “can be seen as a sort of jiu-jitsu that uses representation itself to overthrow representation.” (1987, 75) Thus, Gaiman’s graphic novel can be considered as a postmodern fantastic work not only



because of the use of metafictional narratives that question the substance of reality, but also because it shares some hallmarks with the postmodernist movement. (McHale, 1987, 74)

The first feature the fantastic literature and postmodernism have in common is hesitation. (McHale, 1987, 74) Todorov's defines hesitation, or "'epistemological uncertainty'" as "the underlying principle of the fantastic", because a literary text belongs to the fantastic as long as "it *hesitates* between natural and supernatural." (McHale, 1987, 74) Whereas Todorov claims that twentieth-century fantastic literature has lost this hesitation, for all writing of this period is hesitant, McHale challenges this position and places the power to hesitate into the reader's hand, without the characters or the narrative having to do the hesitating. (1987, 75) Another shared characteristic is banality: according to McHale, a postmodernist fantastic work uses the "rhetoric of contrastive banality" (1987, 76), which implies the characters' lack of surprise as they experience an otherworldly element. The divergence between the element of amazement and the characters' normal reaction serves to heighten the reader's amazement and to deepen the confrontation between the real and the fantastic. (McHale, 1987, 77) However, fantastic literary texts still maintain a certain degree of resistance towards the supernatural element. (McHale, 1987, 77) This resistance of normality, the third facet of the postmodernist fantastic, is felt, if not by the characters, at least by the reader, and it establishes the fundamental dialogue between the real and the fantastic. (McHale, 1987, 77) When Dream and Shakespeare meet for the first time in *Men of Good Fortune*, the latter does not show any kind of surprise towards Dream's presence, whose physical appearance might give away his non-human origin. Will simply goes with him to talk and strike the bargain. Shakespeare's unconcerned reaction is in contrast with the one he has in front of the fairies as he is performing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. And finally, in *The Tempest*, the only fantastic elements are the magician

Prospero and Dream, but they do not interfere with Shakespeare's outside world, they only act inside his mind.

The Shakespearean episode *A Midsummer Night's Dream* belongs to the postmodern category of the Chinese-box worlds. This category refers to a narrative structure resulting from nesting or embedding of stories within stories that leads to the interruption or complication of the "ontological 'horizon' of the fiction, multiplying its worlds, and laying bare the process of world-construction." (McHale, 1987, 112) McHale uses Genette's "metalanguage of narrative levels" (1987, 113) to describe this recursive structure. He thus determines the following levels:

- Primary world, or "*diegesis*" (McHale, 1987, 113): the world of reality, where the characters live;
- Secondary or "hypodiegetic" world (McHale, 1987, 113): within the primary world, someone reads a story and projects a secondary world, one level down from their own;
- Tertiary or "hypo-hypodiegetic" world (McHale, 1987, 113): at their turn, the characters of the secondary world project another world, descending into another level of reality.

And so on, adding the prefix "hypo" each time a new world is projected and the narrative descends deeper in its structure. There are five different strategies that foreground the ontological dimension of a world: frequency, which involves the repeated interruption of the primary world with hypodiegetic dimensions, with representations within representations; infinite regress, where the recursive structure may become so embedded it loses itself into its nesting; *trompe-l'œil*, which confuses the different dimensions, so that the reader mistakes one narrative level with one lower or higher; strange loops or metalepsis, which is a "violation of the hierarchy of

narrative levels that occurs whenever a nested representation slips from still to animation, or vice versa" (McHale, 1987, 119); *mise-en-abyme*, which disrupts the logic of narrative hierarchy. (McHale, 1987, 113 - 130)

At the beginning of issue 19, Shakespeare and the actors constitute the diegetic world, the primary level of 'reality'. Dream and the Fairies intrude into this level and, at their turn, constitute a secondary world, as they share other independent narratives inside *The Sandman* universe. However, when Shakespeare and his company start performing their play, they create a fictional world mirroring reality and thus they establish another dimensional level: the primary world shifts from the mortals to Dream and the Fairies, as they are the audience of the play and become the focus of the narrative. Gaiman uses the play to interrupt with frequency Dream's primary dimension and to blur the distinction between the worlds even more. Further, the play within the play ultimately constitutes a third level, a tertiary world inside the issue.

### 3.2. The question of identity

The study of characters in novels may provide a useful model for understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside novels. If our knowledge of this world is now seen to be mediated through language [...], then literary fiction becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of 'reality' itself. (Waugh, 1984, 3)

Following Waugh's words, it proves useful to further analyse the characters of Dream and Shakespeare, as they both represent a metaphor for Gaiman and for the author in general.

#### 3.2.1. Dream, an atypical hero

When Gaiman started writing *The Sandman*, he decided to begin his narrative with an almighty hero, capable of doing potentially everything, and tried to work with that. (Bender, 1999, 234) Morpheus embodies a modern model of the Romantic/Byronic hero (Elder, 2007, 64), both in his physical appearance – tall, pale, emaciated and constantly dressed in black clothes – and in his temper – silent, haughty and detached, infused with a “brooding, adolescent alienation, the one you typically get when you're sixteen.” (Bender, 1999, 36) This superior attitude and its mythological, eternal nature prevent him from getting close to human mentality and sensitivity and thus make him an atypical hero. It also makes it difficult for the reader to sympathise with the character. However, Gaiman builds the graphic novel so that the first volume immediately starts with a powerless Dream, completely at the mercy of his enemies. It then shows how he gains back his powers, tools and reign. By issue 5, Morpheus has taken his revenge on his jailers and has already built back the Dreaming: everything is back to normal. However, this does not

comfort the Lord of Dreams: instead, he falls into melancholy, as he feels empty and purposeless in this new life. Death appears at his side and tries to push him to react, to find a new challenge. As she calls him “utterly the stupidest, most self-centred, appalling excuse for an anthropomorphic personification, [...] an infantile, adolescent, pathetic specimen” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 1, 8), her words humanise him, scale down his figure and mock the darkest and most tragic traits of his personality. In this way, Gaiman creates for him a dimension closer to that of mortals and of the reader, who can now sympathise with Dream and appreciate him more. Moreover, his flaws highlight the need for a change in him, but they evidently

make him truly worthy of the mythic dimension that Gaiman has placed him in, and it's Dream's recognition of his shortcomings that finally allows him to win whatever redemption he pulls off – that makes him, finally, a hero. (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, Introduction)

As aforementioned, as Dream Lord and thus creator of the human imagination, Morpheus is also Prince of Stories and patron of writers. This is why it is almost straightforward to compare Dream with Shakespeare: they both lost a child because of their obligations to their roles, Orpheus the former and Hamnet the latter. Further, they both have a very complicated relationship with their duty: the bargain Shakespeare strikes with Morpheus implies that his work will outlive him, as much as the Dreaming and dreams in general will survive after Morpheus' death. Moreover, Shakespeare's isolation resembles that of Dream: “because the Dreaming was part of him, the Sandman literally lived in his own mind – which makes him a metaphor for the artist.” (Bender, 1999, 208) Finally, Dream's abdication to his role as Dream Lord at the end of the series closely resembles Shakespeare's decision to give up on writing solo plays. However, when Morpheus dismisses Will in their last meeting, he justifies his request for a play like *The Tempest* by saying he will have no story of his own, that he is so isolated and bound to

rules and to his role he cannot allow himself to change. But the readers immediately notice that nothing he is saying is, in fact, true: what they have just read throughout seventy-five issues is the story of an almighty being becoming more and more human and self-sacrificing, to the point of preparing his own death to allow the world to change and become something new. According to Mikel Gilmore in his introduction to *The Wake*,

Morpheus died for love. [...] [He] made bad choices: bad for him, bad for others. He could not understand how to care for his own heart – he could not grasp its limitations or vanities or real needs – nor could he understand or respect the true patterns in the hearts of others. He was great, but he was also terrible. (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, Introduction)

Morpheus is neither entirely a positive nor a negative character: Gaiman conceives him as made of lights and shadows, as much as dreams themselves are not always reassuring or comforting. He represents not only the bright side of dreams, but also nightmares, the darkest fantasies the mind is able to concoct.

### **3.2.2. “A willing vehicle for the great stories”: Shakespeare as man and writer**

Another feature of postmodernism Gaiman engages with is the concept of “The Death of the Author”, put forward by Roland Barthes in his essay in 1967. According to Barthes, a text “is henceforth made and read in such a way that at all its levels the author is absent” (in McHale, 1987, 199) and therefore “the writer does not originate his discourse, but mixes already extant discourses.” (McHale, 1987, 200) The question Barthes poses relies on the fact that a text presupposes someone who physically writes it, but that author should be completely removed from that text; authors have to project

themselves inside words and “die”. In this way, writing can become a “neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.” (Barthes in McHale, 1987, 200) Michel Foucault problematises this concept in his essay *What is an author?* (1969), demonstrating that contemporary notions of the idea of the dead author actually preserve it in a displaced form: inside its work. This concept is problematic because it only shifts the authority of the author from the physical body to its written body: “the *oeuvre* is only the author in disguise.” (McHale, 1987, 200) Foucault thus hypothesises the author as a function not only in a text but also in culture in general, a function that varies throughout the centuries. The author becomes “an *institution*, governed by the institutions which in a particular society regulate the circulation of discourses [...]; as a *construct* of the reading-process, rather than a textual given; as *plural* rather than unitary.” (McHale, 1987, 200) Foucault’s theory embeds Barthes’ dead author and rethinks it in a different light. The absence of the author is not a new notion, as the author has been absent differently throughout history, or rather always present differently: “writing has *always* involved the eclipse of the subject writing, but the degree of *awareness* of this fact has varied.” (McHale, 1987, 201) In postmodernist writing, the problem is that postmodern authors know *de facto* to be only a function, but they rather choose to act as subjects, as presences inside their own texts. And this “oscillation between authorial presence and absence” (McHale, 1987, 202) is in fact the main feature of those authors. According to McHale, the author is

neither fully present nor completely absent, s/he plays hide-and-seek with us throughout the text, which projects an illusion of authorial presence only to withdraw it abruptly, filling the void left by this withdrawal with surrogate subjectivity once again. (1987, 202)

Therefore, through the characters of Shakespeare and Dream, Gaiman describes his role as an author and his own feelings towards his job, particularly towards *The Sandman*. As a matter of fact, what Gaiman explores in his graphic novel is “the burden of words” (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6), the inevitable losses tied to a life dedicated to bringing stories (and thus dreams) to life.

The strongest example of the price of dreams is the loss of Hamnet, Shakespeare’s son. Halfway through issue 19, page 13, that Gaiman himself described as the core of the whole story (Bender, 1999, 83), presents a scene where Hamnet talks about his strained relationship with his father. The whole page is set backstage and frames Hamnet as he is speaking to one of his fellow actors: Gaiman is offering an insight into Shakespeare’s career from Hamnet’s perspective. The child does not see him as a talented playwright, but rather as an absent father, as he is “very distant, [...] it’s like he’s somewhere else. Anything happens he just makes stories out of it. I’m less real to him than any of the characters in his plays. [...] If I died, he’d just write a play about it. *Hamnet*.” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3) Gaiman is obviously playing with the reader, hinting to the resemblance between Hamnet’s name and the tragic play *Hamlet*, which Shakespeare will in fact write after his son’s death. The disturbing remarks Hamnet makes are completely unmet by the other actor, who replies he would be very proud of Will, would he be his father, showing once again how communication is cut off between characters inside the graphic novel. Hamnet nonetheless concludes his complaint affirming that “all that matters to him... all that matters is the stories” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3), which Shakespeare himself will confirm later, in *The Wake*. As he is reviewing his life with Dream, he wonders if everything he went through was really worth it:

Whatever happened to me in my life happened to me as a writer of plays. [...] I watched my life as if it were happening to someone else. My son died. And I was hurt; but I WATCHED my hurt, and



even relished it, a little, for now I could write a real death, a true loss. (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6)

What Gaiman wants to explore with Shakespeare is actually the dark spots of being a storyteller. What he implies is that someone doing this job is always somehow disconnected from her or his life, always one step away from it: “when something terrible is happening, 99 percent of you is feeling terrible, but 1 percent is standing off to the side [...] and saying, ‘I can use this’.” (Bender, 1999, 77) As he goes on in his speech, Shakespeare admits that his characters are more real to him than any of the people he is close with. (Gaiman, 2019, vo. 10, 6) In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare is still solely concerned with the idea of becoming a great playwright, he still has to understand what the cost of following one's dreams is. What drives him is the eagerness to achieve his goal, no matter how much he will have to sacrifice. Shakespeare is unaware of the reasons and consequences of his desires, unlike Dream, who knows that mortals never understand the price, “they only see the prize, their heart's desire, their dream... But the price of getting what you want, is getting what once you wanted.” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3) Eventually, Shakespeare comes to “half-regret [their] bargain” (Gaiman, 2018, vol. 3, 3) and finally he admits he dreams “of being nobody at all. My every third thought is of the grave.” (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6) This change of heart is due to time and isolation, to a life spent more inside words than actually in the world, as Jonson accused him: “reality [was] necessarily less important to him than his dreams, his writings.” (Castaldo, 2004, 105) Hence, Gaiman here suggests that dreams, while a necessary part of life, have the disturbing ability to take the place of real life. Further, through Shakespeare's increasing isolation, Gaiman implies that dreams can also make a normal life impossible as exemplified in issue 75. Chided by his wife and resented by his daughter, Will finds himself with no life at all and is eager to finish the play that closes his bargain with Morpheus and give up on

writing. His character Prospero, a magician who is making preparations to renounce his magic and leave his island, is a metaphor for the playwright of his literary magic and ready to retire. It is inevitable to draw a parallel with both Morpheus, who at his turn is making preparations to leave his kingdom, and with Gaiman himself, who is writing the closing chapter of the whole series after seven years of publications. When Gaiman has Dream ask Will “Do you see yourself reflected in your tale?” (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6), Shakespeare replies “I would be a fool if I denied it. I am Prosper, certainly; and I trust I shall” (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6), and Caliban, Antonio, Gonzalo, Trinculo, Stephano, he adds. It is difficult not to see Gaiman behind Shakespeare’s words, as Gaiman himself also admitted in the introduction to *The View From the Cheap Seats*:

There is writing in here about things and people that are close to my heart. There’s some of my life in here, too: I tend to write about things from wherever I am standing, and that means I include possibly too much me in the things I write. (Gaiman, 2016, xvii)

It thus demonstrates the postmodern tendency of the author to swing in a present absence, never fully there but also never fully absent,

absent as an abstract, intellectual and mythic creator of stories, yet present as the man who talks about his Halloween preparations and writer’s block, for instance, in the online journal and interviews. (Gordon, 2006, 85)

As a matter of fact, Gaiman’s massive use of the internet and social media provides his readers with a deep insight on what his work as a writer entails, and rather than portraying him as an isolated island (as both representations of Dream and Shakespeare would suggest), it draws him extensively closer to his readership. Further, he does not withdraw from long queues at his book signings, eager to meet in person his audience. And the internet itself

becomes a fine example of that same paradoxical presence and absence, as Gaiman can post whatever and whenever he wants, as much as he can silence himself. This cements even more the bond amongst author, characters and audience.

*The Tempest* also adds to the idea of Shakespeare the writer taking inspiration for his works from the outside world and daily life happening around him. Unlike his other works, that were “written to make the pit cheer” (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6) and have “no art, just artifice” (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6), his last play feels more authentic because it derives from his private anxieties, longings, and regrets. Through this issue, as Gaiman portrays it,

Shakespeare the author gives voice to painful truths about the dangerously seductive power of fantasy and the cost of authorship that Shakespeare the mortal man is in no position to comprehend. (Lanier, 2002, 123)

Finally, in issue 75, Gaiman tackles the problems of fame his authorship brought him. By his own words, the problems of success are even harder than problems of failure “because nobody warns you about them.” (Gaiman, 2016, 490) The very first problem is the so-called Impostor Syndrome, which is when people think of themselves as unworthy of their success. Then, it comes the problem of learning how to say no. And after that, “the biggest problem of success is that the world conspires you to stop doing the thing you do, because you are successful.” (Gaiman, 2016, 491) Specifically, when he talks about his graphic novel, he claims that

there were periods near the end of the series where Sandman seemed larger, deeper, more important than my whole life was. [...] While I was working on [it], I remembered all of it, at all times [...]. I was keeping all of that stuff in my head, loaded in the RAM of my brain. It was an enormous relief when the series was completed, because that allowed me to ‘unload it from memory.’ (Bender, 1999, 26)

Further, both him and Shakespeare share the idea of writing as a collaborative process: they both borrow material from previous works and reuse it to their purposes. And Gaiman, as much as Shakespeare the writer, finds himself praised for creating something original and completely different from his predecessors while at the same time he is disturbingly aware that most of his stories, characters and ethos are borrowed from original sources now obscured by his work. (Castaldo, 2004, 107) "There is some of me in it. [...] Things I saw, things I thought." (Gaiman, 2019, vol. 10, 6): through Shakespeare's words, he is openly admitting that his oeuvre is a collaborative process and is trying to justify it somehow. This highlights even more his uneasy relationship with the source material, as he works it out through Shakespeare's relationship with Dream as both his patron and "source" of his talent. However, Dream himself reassures Will, claiming that he just opened a door inside him, and thus he excludes the idea of genius coming from an external force, be it a god, a muse, or witchcraft.

It is thus with *The Tempest* that Gaiman is able to finally take his bow from *The Sandman*, and, in the meantime, he asks his audience to pardon him and let him go with Prospero's last lines: "As you from crimes would pardoned be, / Let your indulgence set me free." (5.I.337 - 338)

## CONCLUSIONS

Neil Gaiman has been accused, like most fantasy authors, of writing mere escapism: his works are considered dull and superficial. However, to these accusations, he replies that escapist fiction is not necessarily a bad thing, a “cheap opiate used by the muddled and the foolish and the deluded” (Gaiman, 2016, 9), but rather it

opens a door, shows the sunlight outside, gives you a place to go where you are in control [...]. [It] can also give you knowledge about the world and your predicament, give you weapons, give you armour [...]. Skills and knowledge and tools you can use to escape for real. As C.S. Lewis reminded us, the only people who inveigh against escape are jailers.” (Gaiman, 2016, 9)

Thus, rather than debasing and disturbing, Gaiman’s fantasy offers the audience a key to interpreting their own subconscious and the world outside it through a fictional lens, thus making reality more bearable. It is then clear to understand why, inside *The Sandman*, imagination holds such a fundamental role: creativity not only allows humans to obtain crucial tools to understand and shape the world, but above all it constitutes the real structure of the world itself. If humans are storytelling animals and cannot fathom themselves outside of narratives (Gottschall, 2012, xvi), the whole world humans build is thus made out of stories. Therefore, the question of authorship becomes central. It is important to understand the authors’ place in society, the consequences of their works on their audience and the kind of relationship they have with the latter, and also, the downsides of their role. Gaiman deeply investigates these questions throughout the whole series, but he particularly focuses on them during Dream and Shakespeare’s meetings, as they both are two sides of the same coin: their powers and responsibilities

towards their role dominate all other aspects of their lives, leaving no space for anything else. In particular, Shakespeare the character becomes a means to explore the sacrifices authors have to endure for a life devoted to dreams and stories. Generally speaking, “popular portrayals of Shakespeare [...] make Shakespeare speak for or live out certain ideas or attitudes, particularly ideas and attitudes about authorship and art.” (Lanier, 2002, 113) But if Shakespeare offers popular culture “a myth of the Author” (Lanier, 2002, 115), Gaiman delves into and problematises this concept, providing contemporary fantasy writing “with a genealogy legitimising the artistry of a denigrated genre of popular culture and recasts Shakespeare as a popular writer, a mythologizer of ordinary experience.” (Lanier, 2002, 123)

This dissertation has thus tried to analyse Gaiman’s idea of authorship and storytelling inside issue 19 and issue 75 of his graphic novel, *The Sandman*. Both *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest* offer insights on the concept of the author not as a talented and gifted genius, but rather a human being at the mercy of his own dream. The first chapter has tried to provide the theoretical tools to understand Gaiman as a writer, his way of adapting Shakespeare, and the graphic novel as a “new” medium. The second part analyses some of the characters and the plot of *The Sandman*, while also describing both issues where Shakespeare appears. The final paragraph focuses on a survey of the postmodern features of Gaiman’s writing, touching his understanding of mythology, storytelling and metafiction, multiverse construction and, finally, role of the author.

Notwithstanding the enormous losses a writer has to bear throughout his career, the power of words is too strong and primeval not to yield to it. Humans cannot defeat it as it is part of them. Ultimately, imagination and literary creations will outlive people, as “tales and dreams are shadow-truths that will endure when mere facts are dust and ashes, and forgot.” (Gaiman,

2018, vol. 3, 3) Gaiman's own view of authorship and storytelling thus echoes Shakespeare's words, who, through Prospero, claims that "we are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep."  
(4.I.157 - 158)

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