

# Comics, Contractions, and Classics: “At the Sign of the Lion” in the University EFL Classroom

Alzo DAVID-WEST

## Abstract

This paper makes a case for using Mary Jo Duffy’s comic farce “At the Sign of the Lion” in teaching English as a foreign language to middle-high intermediate and advanced university students. An authentic text, the comic uses spoken contractions found in contemporary American English and employs Early Modern English/Shakespearean English, while providing visual context for language comprehension and featuring two well-known characters, Wolverine and Hercules, from American popular culture and ancient Greek mythology.

Keywords: *authentic text, comics, contemporary American English, early modern English, EFL, spoken contractions*

## Introduction

The terms “comic,” “comic book,” and “graphic novel” are used interchangeably, though there is no consensus among scholars as to their synonymity or their definitions. There is a sense, however, that the first two terms are informal and the third is technical. The word “comic” comes from the Latin *cōmicus* via the Greek *kōmikós*, implying comedy and revelry, and it is apparently from this etymology that comics and comic books are sometimes called “funnies” and “funny books.” Not all comics are funny, though, and this is where the utility of the more descriptive “graphic novel” comes into effect, suggesting an extended fictional narrative composed of integrated pictures and text.<sup>1</sup>

But “graphic novel” also has its own complications. There is no real agreement as to whether it is a form, format, genre, or medium. Some writers

distinguish between classifications, but others make no distinction at all.<sup>2</sup> Of course, a graphic novel can function as form, format, genre, *and* medium simultaneously. Specialized problems remain nevertheless, such as what page length or, more structurally, what degree of linguistic and narrative complexity qualifies a story with sequential art as novelistic.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, there are cases in which the term “graphic novel” comes across as too cumbersome, even mistaken, as in reference to an illustrated short story of six pages.

One such case is Mary Jo Duffy’s farce “At the Sign of the Lion,” appearing in *Marvel Treasury Edition*, Vol. 1, No. 26, 1980, published by Marvel Comics.<sup>4</sup> A comedy, the story is about a tavern brawl between two unlikely characters: the short hair-trigger-tempered mutant Wolverine, from the X-Men, and the muscle-bound and carousing demigod Hercules, from Greek mythology. Besides the incompatible characters and their conflict situation—Hercules gets female attention and tosses Wolverine away from a bar—the farce is accentuated by stylized but realistic illustrations in panels that use cinematic effects: angles, bird’s- and worm’s-eye views, close-ups, and wide shots.

“At the Sign of the Lion” may not be “high art,” but it does have applications in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). Although the comic-style gag is too text heavy for beginner-level students, it is particularly useful for middle-high intermediate to advanced students and especially if these are university EFL students and English majors. There are three basic reasons why a comic such as “At the Sign of the Lion” can be used in the EFL classroom: (1) the story is an *authentic text*; (2) the visual component is *engaging*; and (3) the images provide a concrete *context for language comprehension*. What is more, the comic introduces students to English in a manner that is non-didactic.

### Contractions

Silly as the story is, “At the Sign of the Lion” has the merit of approximating to oral speech. The characters communicate with dialog balloons in casual spoken English, not formal written English, using common

expressions, contractions, idioms, and interjections. This is especially the case for Wolverine and the secondary characters, who converse in contemporary American English.<sup>5</sup> Regarding contractions, a number found in EFL textbooks appear in the story, for example, *can't*, *don't*, *he's*, *I'd*, *I'll*, *I'm*, *I've*, *let's*, *she's*, *that's*, *you're*, *we're*, and *what's*. But there are other spoken forms that are hard to find in textbooks, perhaps because these forms are not considered “proper” (see Fig. 1).<sup>6</sup>

<b>a'</b>	of	<b>lemme</b>	let me
<b>an'</b>	and	<b>oughtta</b>	ought to
<b>bub</b>	buddy	<b>probably'a</b>	probably would have
<b>callin'</b>	calling	<b>should'a</b>	should have
<b>'cause</b>	because	<b>shuddup</b>	shut up
<b>'cept</b>	except	<b>ta</b>	to
<b>comin'</b>	coming	<b>tryin'</b>	trying
<b>coppin' out</b>	copping out	<b>wait'll</b>	wait until
<b>'em</b>	them	<b>wanna</b>	want to
<b>goin'</b>	going	<b>what's'a</b>	what is the
<b>gonna</b>	going to	<b>whatta</b>	what do
<b>gotta</b>	got to	<b>where'd</b>	where did
<b>hopin'</b>	hoping	<b>ya</b>	you
<b>kiddin'</b>	kidding	<b>yer</b>	your

Fig. 1. Spoken contractions used by Wolverine in “At the Sign of the Lion.”

EFL students who are not exposed to natural spoken forms and contractions, but who only learn the artificial and limited selections in textbooks, will be at a significant disadvantage when they communicate with native speakers of English. A sentence like “If I’d stuck around, I’d probably’a had it out with him,” would, for instance, be challenging, if not completely incomprehensible, were it encountered in a conversation with a native speaker.<sup>7</sup> What complicates the sentence, which is modeled on one in the Wolverine and Hercules story, is that it combines two spoken contractions (*I’d* and *probably’a*) and two idioms (*stuck around* and *had it out*), which

mean “stayed” and “fought.”

Should the spoken sentence as provided above be considered “improper” by an EFL instructor and rejected for “If I had stayed, I probably would have fought with him,” that would be a prescriptive (rule imposing) and proscriptive (censoring) approach to teaching English.<sup>8</sup> Compared to the first sentence, the second is formal. Needless to say, it is important that students know how to construct good formal sentences. They are valued in academic, administrative, and business discourses. By the same token, formal and informal registers coexist in English, as in any language, and the student who knows both and the social contexts of their use will be the more successful English communicator.

One context for casual or informal English is illustrated in three panels on the first page of “At the Sign of the Lion” (see Fig. 2). An attractive and fashionably dressed young woman approaches Wolverine at the tavern bar; she tries to engage in small talk; and he rejects her with his customarily nasty attitude. The young lady, startled by the man’s callous rudeness, storms off in angry humiliation, saying there is nothing special about him anyway. Wolverine, realizing his mistake, proceeds with the hopeless excuse that he was just joking and says he will buy her a drink, but it is now too late. Comprehension of the exchange in English is aided by the characters’ body language and facial expressions.



Fig. 2. A young woman unsuccessfully tries to get Wolverine’s attention.

As with this and other sequences, there are several possibilities for the comic, which an English instructor can read aloud within 5 minutes, allowing EFL students to practice listening/reading skills. The instructor can also provide a vocabulary list with short definitions, and learners, either individually or in small groups, can do a reading/writing exercise, describing words and actions and summarizing the story. Since the comic has a cinematic look and feel and reads like a playscript, the dialog also lends itself to speaking activities. Different students can rehearse and act out different parts of the story, with the instructor providing guidance with emphasis, intonation, pace, pauses, pronunciation, and tone.<sup>9</sup>

### Classics

Besides contemporary American English and spoken contractions, “At the Sign of the Lion” comes with a number of archaisms in the form of Early Modern English, otherwise known as Shakespearean English (see Fig. 3). This antiquated idiom, which has a dramatic and poetic effect, is spoken by Hercules when he bursts into the tavern ready for drink, revelry, and song. While it may enrich an EFL student’s historical linguistic knowledge, Shakespearean English is obsolete and therefore not a priority for the majority of EFL learners. On the other hand, students who major in English language and literature will benefit from a comic introduction to seventeenth-century English.

<b>dost</b>	do	<b>shalt</b>	shall
<b>doth</b>	does	<b>thee</b>	you
<b>hast</b>	have	<b>thy</b>	your
<b>ho</b>	hey	<b>thyself</b>	yourself
<b>ho ho</b>	ha ha	<b>‘twas</b>	it was
<b>needst</b>	need	<b>‘twould</b>	it would
<b>o’er</b>	over	<b>verily</b>	truly
<b>o’erstep</b>	overstep	<b>zounds</b>	God’s wounds!

Fig. 3. Shakespearean English used by Hercules in “At the Sign of the Lion.”

“At the Sign of the Lion” also serves as a light point of entry to the classics—indirectly to Shakespeare and more directly to Greek mythology—offering English majors comic exposure to the history of the English language and to the Western literary tradition. While Hercules’ confrontation with Wolverine in Duffy’s story is preposterous, the farce provides simple, slapstick, and memorable examples of Shakespearean English, such as when the proud Hercules picks up a sardonic Wolverine and throws him away from the bar. The “lion of Olympus,” as he has calls himself, says, “Thou needst not be *churlish* when ‘tis so much simpler—to move.”<sup>10</sup> This move leads to quite a bit of action.

Although the third and fourth pages of the comic story are taken up by horseplay, there are contextually appropriate instances and contrasts of Early Modern English and contemporary American English when the demigod and mutant altercate. After Wolverine lands an ineffective punch on Hercules’ muscular chest, the Olympian declares, “Have a care! Hercules doth begin to find thee *annoying*, mortal. Begone!” Wolverine, slapped away, says, “All right. That *does* it. You think you’re such hot stuff ... Let’s see how you do against *adamantium claws!*” Seeing the sharp metal extrusions shoot out from the back of Wolverine’s fists, an astounded Hercules exclaims, “Zounds!”<sup>11</sup>

Hercules later ridicules Wolverine’s height, after which the demigod is brought to a falling crash (see Fig. 4). Humbled, Hercules honors his small opponent as a “little lion” and offers to toast their “glorious combat.” Wolverine, confused, gets an explanation: “‘Twould be folly to continue the battle. Thou hast proven thy mettle, and Hercules craves no victory o’er a mortal.”<sup>12</sup> The two shake hands and realize that the tavern patrons had all run away. Altogether, the exchange with pictorial anchoring is valuable for English majors, providing a nutshell of idioms and archaisms to make communicative sense of. EFL students can also write short opinion and research papers on the story.



Fig. 4. Wolverine smashes a tavern table over the powerful Hercules.

As a subject for a paper, “At the Sign of the Lion” gives EFL English majors an opportunity to do literary criticism on a short piece of authentic text. Papers can be divided into five paragraphs—introduction, characters, conflict, meaning, and conclusion—of five to twelve sentences each (see appendix). There is repeated lion symbolism in the story, and Hercules slew lions with his bare hands in ancient myth.<sup>13</sup> What does this suggest? Hercules began the fight with Wolverine but restrains himself in the end. Why? Students can address such questions, as well as examine things like allegory, metaphor, and morality; ancient myth and popular culture; and masculinity, sexism, and violence.

## Conclusion

Mary Jo Duffy’s “At the Sign of the Lion” is not a book or a novel, but a “comic farce” or “graphic farce” that is usable in an EFL teaching and learning context on account of its short length, use of dialog and visuals, and applicability in practicing the four language skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing. While the same also goes for comic strips, the six-page farce has the distinction of telling a relatively self-contained story with more plot elements (e.g., characters, setting, conflict, climax, resolution) and scene changes than strips permit, appearing like a short film on paper. These are

factors that make the work and other texts like it potentially more engaging as EFL material.

As an authentic text that provides instances of spoken English with social context, the story is also more “natural” than a textbook, providing, in particular, a good number of spoken contractions in American English that EFL textbooks tend not to include. This is not to say that English textbooks are useless. Comics, which are designed for mass popular consumption and necessarily include informal language, can perhaps be used in supplement to textbooks to balance out the formal, selective, and standard English. The advantage of introducing, teaching, and practicing natural spoken forms and contractions with EFL learners is that this will serve to develop students’ communicative competence.

The classical incorporations in “At the Sign of the Lion” also make the story relevant for EFL English majors, even though the farce is not a case of “great art” or “high art.” Duffy plays with ancient Greek mythology, Shakespearean English, and popular culture, combining things English language and literature majors can research and write about. There are academic fields such as comics studies and popular culture studies, and it is beneficial for students to be able to think critically about English-language comics and express themselves in English. Duffy’s story offers the added possibility, through research, of leading EFL students to the classics of Western literary culture.

There is no guarantee that every student will like “At the Sign of Lion,” but that is not the most essential point. The point is language development with an authentic text that stimulates the optical sense and combines narrative, textual, and visual thinking. Comic-style reading material in the EFL classroom shows considerable promise in language learning, facilitating memory recall, mental categorization of memories and information, and determination of meaning through visual context. The latter, especially, lessens dependence on glossary and dictionary use, contributing to an enjoyable and motivating reading experience.<sup>14</sup> These are important reasons for the use of comics in teaching EFL.



### Notes

- 1 The term “graphic novel” was coined by publisher Richard Kyle in 1964, but is often credited to Will Eisner, who popularized it in 1978 and uses it as a synonym for “comic book” and as a description for a “form of comic book that is in fetal development.” See Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist* (Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 2001), pp. 7, 141.
- 2 See the case with the term “comics” in Gorg Mallia, “Learning from the Sequence: The Use of Comics in Instruction,” *ImageText*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2007, University of Florida, [http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v3\\_3/mallia](http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v3_3/mallia) (accessed July 3, 2011).
- 3 On novelization, see M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996).
- 4 The story is also available in Mary Jo Duffy (w), Ken Landgraf (p), and George Pérez (i), “At the Sign of the Lion,” *The Incredible Hulk and Wolverine*, Vol. 1, No. 1, October 1986, Marvel Comics, pp. 37–42.
- 5 Two instances of the no longer current “turkey,” 1970s American slang for “idiot” or “loser,” appear in the story. EFL students should be made aware of the datedness of the term for the sake of communicative and cultural competence.
- 6 The notion of “proper” English is based on a bias towards written language and written grammar that regards spoken language and the forms, structures, and manifestations of spoken communication as relatively inferior. See Ronald Carter and Michael McCarthy, *Cambridge Grammar of English: A Comprehensive Guide: Spoken and Written English Grammar Usage* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 9.
- 7 The author tried the sentence with a thirty-two-year-old Japanese who is fluent in formal spoken and written English. The sentence was repeated twice, but it was not understood.
- 8 See illustrations of the “to-contraction” and “wanna-contraction” in Liliane Haegeman and Jacqueline Guéron, *English Grammar: A Generative Approach* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 281. See specialized discussion in Stephen Crain and Diane Carolyn Lillo-Martin, *An Introduction to Linguistic Theory and Language Acquisition* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), pp. 242–253.
- 9 Students can also do a small-group writing and acting activity, using the context and setting of the story in an original short dialog and performing the roles of their selected characters.
- 10 Duffy, Landgraf, and Pérez, p. 38; italics in original.

- 11 Ibid., p. 39; italics in original.
- 12 Ibid., p. 42.
- 13 See Edith Hamilton, “Hercules,” *Mythology* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1998), pp. 224–243.
- 14 Evan Jones, “The Use of Comic Book Style Reading Material in an EFL Extensive Reading Program: A Look at the Changes in Attitude and Motivation to Read in English in a Japanese University,” *Language Education in Asia*, Vol. 1, 2010, pp. 228–241, pp. 229, 230, 234, 235, CamTESOL, [http://www.camtesol.org/Download/LEiA\\_Vol1\\_2010/LEiA\\_V1\\_19\\_Jones\\_The\\_Use\\_of\\_Comic\\_Book\\_Style\\_Reading\\_Material\\_in\\_an\\_EFL\\_Extensive\\_Reading\\_Program.pdf](http://www.camtesol.org/Download/LEiA_Vol1_2010/LEiA_V1_19_Jones_The_Use_of_Comic_Book_Style_Reading_Material_in_an_EFL_Extensive_Reading_Program.pdf) (accessed July 3, 2011).

## Appendix

*The following is a sample student paper in MLA format on Mary Jo Duffy’s “At the Sign of the Lion” written by junior and sophomore English majors Yuka Sakamoto and Chihiro Suzuki for Academic Writing 2/Research and Writing 3 in Spring 2011 at Aichi Prefectural University. Surface errors in grammar and punctuation have been edited. Permission was obtained from the student authors to use their paper as a writing sample.*

### Inconsistency between Heroism and Masculinity

The comic story “At the Sign of the Lion” was written in 1986 by Mary Jo Duffy, penciled by Ken Landgraf, and inked by George Pérez. It is set at a tavern called Sign of the Lion. There, a fight develops between two people. One is Wolverine, who is a hero of the X-Men. He is a member of a special group. The other is Hercules. He is a character from Greek mythology. Wolverine and Hercules are the modern hero and the ancient hero. Both of them show physical power, which is a symbol of masculinity. Although Wolverine and Hercules are heroes, their fight is not for justice, but for desire. This sort of inconsistency makes their story a comedy.

First, Wolverine, whose real name is Logan, is a character who has recently appeared in the X-Men movies. He has a special mutant power. At all times, he is full of anger, and he likes to act independently (*Uruvuarin; X-Men*). Second, Hercules is a famous Greek hero and the son of Zeus. He is one of the strongest heroes in Greek mythology and known for twelve great achievements, one of which was killing a lion in Nemea’s forest (Atouda 63–64).

Wolverine is drinking at the tavern in “At the Sign of the Lion.” A woman talks to

him, but she is disgusted by his response. Suddenly, Hercules from Greek mythology appears. He has a brawny body, and because of that, women, including the woman who talked to Wolverine, are attracted to him. Wolverine feels jealous over Hercules' popularity with women. Moreover, Hercules orders Wolverine to move from the tavern bar. Wolverine gets angry, and he and Hercules begin a passionate battle. Finally, Hercules recognizes Wolverine's ability, and they finish fighting. Hercules compares Wolverine to mythical Greek figures, for example, Giants and Titans. Wolverine also considers their combat to be great and says, "It was a good fight" (Duffy 42). Afterwards, they start to drink together.

Wolverine and Hercules are both heroes. Wolverine of the X-Men has a superhuman power that he uses to fight for humanity, and Hercules in Greek myth is so brave that he killed a fierce lion with his bare hands. Both characters fight in the story by showing their extraordinary strength to each other. In spite of the heroic battle, they do not fight for the cause of justice. Rather, they do so for personal reasons. The purpose of their fight is to attract women. For example, Hercules says, "Thou dost occupy the only empty area that can accommodate Hercules and all of his fair companions," and Wolverine says, "I'll make room for the redhead, 'cause she's with me" (Duffy 38). Because of this, their combat does not really symbolize heroism, masculinity, and morality. Moreover, Duffy's association of the characters with mythical Greek figures makes the story humorous.

For a long time, masculinity has been an idea of the strong: "the image of masculinity is strength, leadership, and authority" (Nakamura 29). Male heroes are symbols of masculinity, and they are supposed to be respectable figures. Although Wolverine and Hercules are heroes, the tavern owner in "At the Sign of the Lion" says, "My insurance doesn't cover super heroes" (Duffy 40). In addition, their combat is not watched by the customers. The woman who had approached Wolverine says, "I ... I don't wanna see how this ends" (Duffy 41). These lines show that strong men are not necessarily heroes and symbols of masculinity. The conception that masculinity is physical strength is an outdated custom, and such inconsistencies confirm that the story is a comedy.

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