

Macbeth Meets Alley Oop, and William Shakespeare Meets V. T. Hamlin and Tom Stoppard

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V. T. Hamlin created Alley Oop as a simple cave man coping with his girlfriend, his pet dinosaur, and the politics of his tribe in adventure stories that had a light, humorous touch. That was the premise when the comic strip began on 5 December, 1932 (the date is usually given erroneously as 7 August, 1933, which is when *Alley Oop* changed syndicates); the strip continued with this premise for seven years until Hamlin created Doc Wonmug and his time machine, at which point Wonmug snatched Oop out of the past and made him a friend. Over the years, Oop went to China, Egypt, and Troy and made at least two trips into outer space. The strip was designed to appeal to both adults and children. Those who know the history of China, Egypt, and Troy may appreciate the historical and cultural crosscurrents, yet the same stories were reprinted in comic books and Big Little Books, which were marketed to children as adventure stories. *Alley Oop* constituted one segment of two Saturday morning cartoon series: *Archie's TV Funnies*, which ran on the Columbia Broadcast System (CBS) from 1971-1973; and *The Fabulous Funnies*, which ran on the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in 1978. There was a 1960 pop song by the Hollywood Argyles titled after the character and targeted at teenaged buyers (Hollywood Argyles 1960). The old caveman, it seems, crosses generation boundaries. (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

Hamlin appropriated Shakespeare in one of his time-travel stories, though with an unexpected twist. An extraordinary two-month sequence of daily strips (2 April-1 June, 1953; the Sunday strips have a different continuity) retells the story of *Macbeth* from the point of view of a minor character that is played by Oop. Doc Wonmug wants to bring Oop to his lab, but accidentally sends him to Macbeth's Scotland, where the nearly naked caveman is cold in the chilly climate. While looking for clothes, he finds the Weird Sisters (7 April); they direct him to Macbeth's castle (9 April), where he dresses and arms himself (11 April) and sees Duncan's sons flee on horseback without understanding why (10 April). Oop is then mistaken for a soldier and ordered to guard the palace, where he sees Macbeth first tell Banquo to "fail not our feast" and then sends the murderers after him (*Macbeth* 3.1.27; Hamlin 1953, 15 April).¹

In a moment that in the theater would be called metatheatrical, and I'll call metacomic, Doc Wonmug views these events and complains that because *Macbeth* is fiction, these things cannot have happened (20 April). While most comic strip readers would not know that Macbeth and several of the other characters are historical, even though Shakespeare made numerous changes to the chronicles, Wonmug's concern proves important at the end of the story.² Oop knows enough of the story to realize that Macbeth behaves strangely at the banquet because he sees Banquo's ghost. This is also helpful to readers who do not know the story (18 April). Oop goes with Macbeth and the others to slaughter the Macduff family, a trip Macbeth does not make in the play. Oop is knocked out so he cannot save the household (2-7 May); he then joins the army of Malcolm and Macduff, but the scene shifts to Macbeth's preparations for battle, taking the story away from Oop for several days. Oop is the soldier who identifies the wood as Birnam (5.4.3), the only line written by Shakespeare that he speaks (21 May). (We will not, however, over-think this and wonder how he knows.) After the battle, it is Oop who holds open the door so that Macduff can enter with Macbeth's head (28 May).

Oop experiences all of these events as real history. After the last lines in the play are spoken, however, William Shakespeare steps out from behind a flat. In a metacomic exchange, Oop insults the play, and Shakespeare insults him back (29-30 May). This exchange makes sense of Wonmug's perplexity about what he believes are fictional events in *Macbeth*.

Hamlin adds two interesting interpretations to the *Macbeth* plot. The first occurs when Oop, accompanying Macbeth on his second visit to the Weird Sisters (4.1), fails to see or hear the apparitions; their message is only for Macbeth (30 April). Later, when Macbeth goes to his wife's bedside after she dies, he dries his tears with the canopy of her bed (22 May).

Hamlin's retelling of *Macbeth* almost could have inspired Tom Stoppard to write *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967) for the way it tells the story from the perspective of a minor character — the one Shakespeare called Menteth — who is enacted by Oop. Like Stoppard, Hamlin adds scenes not in the play and uses Shakespeare's dialogue to recreate Shakespeare's scenes. The story lacks Stoppard's complexity, intellectual pyrotechnics, and angst, but acquires a Pirandellian touch when William Shakespeare steps out from behind the flat. Until this moment, the story had not been set on stage. Oop instead was participating in events of the eleventh century, complete with long rides on horseback and real deaths. Then the reality suddenly changes: Oop becomes angry, not at being fooled, but at the idea that Shakespeare is the sort of person who could write "this bloody mess" of a play (30 May). The time machine then brings Oop to 1953, where in disgust he immediately heaves Shakespeare's works through a window (1 June). Oop's contempt,

paradoxically, contrasts with the reverent retelling of Shakespeare's story and the careful copying of his dialogue in the previous strips (i.e., 29 April). As in Stoppard's version, minor characters such as this simple caveman have more wisdom than the royal actors of Shakespeare's play. It is unlikely that Stoppard read *Alley Oop* before writing *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, but it would make perfect sense if he had.³

Notes

1. References to Shakespeare's plays come from *The Riverside Shakespeare* unless otherwise noted (Shakespeare 1974).
2. See Boswell-Stone 1968. For a book with a commentary on Shakespeare's changes to Holinshed's *Chronicle*, see Aitchison 1999.
3. Several panels from this *Alley Oop* story have been published in *Shakespeare Newsletter*, 55.3 (2005): 79. This will launch a series of articles that *SNL* will publish on Shakespeare in the comics. I learned from *SNL* co-editor Thomas Pendleton that the sequence was recently reprinted in *Alley Oop, the Magazine*, volume 21, published by SPEC Productions, P.O. Box 32, Manitou Springs, Colo., 80829. Visit the Toonopedia web-site for a good introduction to the strip.

Online Resources

Shakespeare Newsletter Website [cited 4 May, 2006]. <http://www.iona.edu/snl/>.

Toonopedia Web Site [cited 4 May, 2006]. <http://www.toonopedia.com/oop.htm>.

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