

*Shakespeare in V for Vendetta: Supporting the Rebellion*

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## Abstract

The main aim of this study is to explore the strong connections between Shakespearean plays, such as *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, and *V for Vendetta*, both the graphic novel by Alan Moore (1988) and the film version by the Wachowski brothers (2005). My purpose is to investigate how Moore's work and its later film adaptation use some works by the Bard to justify radical political actions, so creating a highly influential work with a deep social impact.

The study begins with an introductory reflection about William Shakespeare as a cultural battlefield, so analyzing the playwright's works as a symbol of hierarchies and its subsequent revisions by countercultural groups. Thus, he has become a popular icon and cultural source of reference for multiple and diverse products such as *V for Vendetta*, which use the revolutionary potential of Shakespeare's works.

Afterwards, the graphic novel and the film *V for Vendetta* are analyzed as works strategically situated between the dystopian fiction and the revenge tragedy. A historical overview is also provided about the relationship between Shakespeare and Guy Fawkes, paying attention to some reflections of the Gunpowder Plot into *Macbeth*. Evidence is given of the prolific employment of quotations from *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and also the use of other features and structural elements from revenge plays to support the character of V, especially in the film version.

Next, *V for Vendetta* is studied as an influential contemporary work with a deep social impact, reactivating the original radical power of Shakespeare as allied of 21<sup>st</sup> century activism. Through the interaction between *V for Vendetta*, both within the movie and the graphic novel, and Shakespeare's works, the playwright updates his power while giving support to V and reinforcing his struggle. And consequently, helping V to reach a highly popular status which has inspired many people, so getting them conscious to act in all kind of actions and protests around the world. Thus, Shakespeare becomes a modern symbol of rebellion, justifying extreme political activism as the only way of empowering people and changing the establishment today.

## KEYWORDS

Shakespeare, appropriation, dystopian, Gunpowder Plot, revenge tragedies, *V for Vendetta* (film and graphic novel)

## Resumen

El principal objetivo de este estudio es explorar las fuertes conexiones entre algunas obras shakespearianas, como *Macbeth* y *Hamlet*, y *V de Vendetta*, tanto la novela gráfica de Alan Moore (1988) como la versión cinematográfica de los hermanos Wachowski (2005). Mi propósito es investigar cómo la obra de Moore y su posterior adaptación fílmica utilizan algunos trabajos del Bardo para justificar acciones políticas radicales, creando así una obra altamente influyente con un profundo impacto social.

El estudio empieza con una reflexión introductoria sobre William Shakespeare como campo de batalla cultural, analizando las obras del dramaturgo como símbolo de las jerarquías y sus subsecuentes revisiones por grupos contraculturales. De esta forma se ha convertido en un icono popular y en una fuente cultural de referencia para múltiples y diversos productos como *V de Vendetta*, que utilizan el potencial revolucionario de las obras de Shakespeare.

Después, la novela gráfica y la película *V de Vendetta* son analizadas como trabajos estratégicamente situados entre la ficción distópica y la tragedia de venganza. También se propone una revisión histórica de la relación entre Shakespeare y Guy Fawkes, prestando atención a algunos reflejos de la Conspiración de la Pólvora en *Macbeth*. Además se ofrecen evidencias del prolífico empleo de citas de *Hamlet* y *Macbeth*, y también del uso de otras características y elementos estructurales típicos de las tragedias de venganza para respaldar el personaje de V, especialmente en la versión fílmica.

A continuación, se estudia *V de Vendetta* como una influyente obra contemporánea con un profundo impacto social, reactivando el poder radical original de Shakespeare como aliado del activismo del siglo XXI. A través de la interacción entre *V de Vendetta*, en sus formatos de novela gráfica y película, y las obras de Shakespeare, el dramaturgo actualiza su poder mientras apoya a V y refuerza su lucha. Y por consiguiente, ayudando a V a alcanzar un estatus altamente popular que ha inspirado a mucha gente, concienciándola para tomar parte en todo tipo de acciones y protestas alrededor del mundo. Así, Shakespeare se convierte en un símbolo moderno de rebelión, justificando el activismo político extremo como la única forma de empoderamiento de la población y de cambio del sistema establecido hoy en día.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Shakespeare, apropiación, distópico, Conspiración de la Pólvora, tragedias de venganza, *V de Vendetta* (película y novela gráfica)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of current studies about Shakespeare in popular culture, it seems necessary to revise, from a new perspective, some recent cultural products such as *V for Vendetta*, which employ the playwright's works in a different way to satisfy nowadays expectations.

The main aim of this study is to explore in depth connections between some Shakespearean works, such as *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, and *V for Vendetta*, both the graphic novel and the film version. My purpose is to investigate how Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* and later the Wachowski brothers' film version use Shakespeare to justify radical political actions, and how the dynamics of identification between V and Shakespearean heroes works.

The study begins with *Shakespeare as a Cultural Battlefield*, an introductory analysis of the Bard's representations in high and low culture. It continues with a reflection about the dramatist's ambiguous position both as a symbol of the establishment, which takes advantage of him to reinforce itself; and its subsequent revisions of his plays as a countercultural symbol used by resistant groups to vindicate themselves, becoming a popular icon and cultural source of reference for multiple and diverse works such as *V for Vendetta*.

Then, in the chapter *V for Vendetta: Between the Dystopian Fiction and the Revenge Tragedy*, both the comic and the film are assessed showing the most important changes and variations undergone in the process of adaptation, also exploring the main reasons for these modifications. Furthermore, a historical overview of the relationship between Shakespeare and Guy Fawkes is provided, paying attention to some reflections of the Gunpowder Plot into *Macbeth*. In the next part, *V for Vendetta* is analyzed as an innovative catalyst of cultural references, strategically situated between the dystopian fiction and the revenge tragedy, keeping the aspects typical of dystopias, besides employing multiple quotations mainly from *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, but also showing other features and structural elements proper to revenge plays with the ultimate objective to support V's activism.

In the last chapter, *Freedom Forever*, *V for Vendetta* is studied as an influential contemporary work with a deep social impact. It is also given an insight into V's political commitment and its different interpretations from a Shakespearean perspective, thus analyzing the stylistic and ideological links established between *V for Vendetta* and *Hamlet*. Then, the next point deals with the radical power of Shakespeare nowadays, as a popular intellectual reference and source of influence on activism. Through works such as *V for Vendetta*, William Shakespeare's texts are updated and transformed into a powerful reference today. At the same time, by rewriting Shakespeare's plays a special alliance is forged between the dramatist and V, thus this character reaches a highly popular status which has inspired many people to get conscious of their real power to change things acting in protests all around the world.

Finally, the study concludes that through the process of identification, assimilation and appropriation of Shakespeare's work by the character of V, the playwright is presented as a symbol of rebellion, justifying extreme political activism as the only way of empowering people and changing the establishment. But also thanks to this interaction between *V for Vendetta*, especially its film version, and Shakespeare's works, the playwright becomes updated once more and his original revolutionary power is reactivated, so influencing and inspiring new generations in 21<sup>st</sup> century.



## 2. SHAKESPEARE AS A CULTURAL BATTLEFIELD

Shakespeare's works are continually updated and adapted to new means of expression and to different times. In doing so, Shakespeare's texts go beyond their original age and circumstances while transforming themselves into new cultural products, which range from faithful plays to other creations apparently as distant as *V for Vendetta*. In the background of this cultural dichotomy, there are opposing political tendencies towards conservative reproduction of his works against others producing radical interventions on them, because "Shakespeare's plays constitute an influential medium through which certain ways of thinking about the world may be promoted and others impeded, they are a site of cultural struggle and change" (Sinfield 155). Thus, Shakespeare himself and his work have become a true cultural battlefield where opposing forces try to defend their view on the author, in order to make their own vision of the world prevail against the others.

### 2.1. Opposing Interpretations of a Popular Icon

Abbreviations, citations, and adaptations of Shakespeare's plays have developed together to a point in which they seem to be almost synonymous of making Shakespeare available and appealing to a wider audience. In this process of adaptation and popularization of Shakespearean works, the genre of many versions have been redefined, and the concept of Shakespeare itself has been revised too. As Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield affirm with respect to the analysis of Shakespearean works: "the relevant history is not just that of four hundred years ago, for culture is made continuously and Shakespeare's text is reconstructed, reappraised, reassigned all the time through diverse institutions in specific contexts" (viii). In that sense, the significance of Shakespeare's plays and the meaning of his words become an object of constant reinterpretation, because they depend "on the cultural field in which they are situated" (viii).

As Peter Holland interestingly points out in "Shakespeare Abbreviated" (2007), abbreviation refashions Shakespeare's plays outside conventions and helps to the construction of popular culture. "Abbreviated Shakespeare becomes a deliberate intervention in a history of cultural reception that negotiates concepts of high/low and popular/elite cultural formations"; this helps to build a history of an emerging concept of Shakespeare himself, also moving Shakespeare outside the conventional spaces of performance (Holland 28). From the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, new versions of the

Bard's plays used popular media, such as TV and cinema, to create more or less radical attempts of adapting his works while searching for new audiences.

As new versions and experimental adaptations have proved, the interpretation of Shakespeare's works is subject to permanent revisions which fuel the intellectual debate and enrich their understanding. According to Sinfield, "they are one of the places where our understanding of ourselves is worked out and, indeed, fought out" (154). Thus, his plays can be understood as a battlefield where cultural forces fight to find their own right interpretation, in doing so they constitute a constant source of inspiration and cultural production in our society.

It is also true that this commitment to try to make the approach to Shakespeare easier and more understandable, has usually happened simultaneously to the ideological message inherent to each particular version, consciously or unconsciously biased. In this respect, the question of the supposed timeless meaning related to Shakespeare's plays seems recurrent. In fact, he has never lost popular appeal because he really casts for all audiences, and there is always something for everyone in his plays. It is obviously true that, at the same time, he is also a symbol of cultural prestige, which is used by governments and authorities to expand national proud and international recognition, as in his 400<sup>th</sup> death anniversary celebration. Related to the timeless aspect there is another crucial question about the original meaning of his plays. In this sense, there are several groups which claim they have the true Shakespeare "because, almost like a religious relic, he constitutes a powerful cultural token", as Sinfield explains (154). Consequently, due to the power conferred to Shakespeare, opposed cultural visions fight to impose their own interpretation on his works.

This systematic trend of adapting and popularizing Shakespeare's plays with different formats and points of view, through different media and addressed to different audiences, just proves culture is not a uniform reality. It entails a wide range of cultural diversity with different aspects described by cultural materialism as residual, dominant, and emergent, and with several levels such as subordinate, repressed and marginal. Dominant and non-dominant elements interact with each other, "sometimes coexisting with, or being absorbed or even destroyed by them, but also challenging, modifying or even displacing them" (Dollimore 6). According to Dollimore and Sinfield, cultural materialism focuses on culture in an analytic way, including the cultures of subordinate and marginalized groups, and forms like television, popular music and fiction; without considering high culture the

only important cultural manifestation or more relevant than the other practices (viii). This critical approach opens an interesting field of research upon cultural manifestations usually despised or relegated by scholars.

From a cultural materialistic perspective, as a consequence of the appropriation of Shakespeare as a concept by one or other political and social side, the playwright has suffered several revisions along history. Depending on the point of view applied, his works were put at the service of the ruling power or just in front of it, as the opposing counter-power. As Dollimore and Sinfield affirm in the foreword of their work *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1994): “culture is not simply a reflection of the economic and political system, but nor can it be independent of it. Cultural materialism therefore studies the implication of literary texts in history” (vii). This way, culture is directly connected to the historical events, being a consequence of them as much as a cause of those facts.

Thus, as Julie Sanders points out, “The history of Shakespearean re-visions provides a cultural barometer for the practice and politics of adaptation and appropriation” (51), and consequently it also gives a record of the political and economic circumstances affecting these revisions. In that sense, for a long time Shakespeare has been shown as the representative of the establishment, but more recent times have witnessed how the Bard has been aligned with more lefty groups, which also have given him a radical touch over the aura of authority that seems to accompany his genius. As Sanders argues, bringing to the text the poet T.S. Eliot and his famous essay: “This critical perspective on the relationship between tradition and the individual talent is one shared by writers producing work from feminist, gay and lesbian, and postcolonial subject-positions” (Sanders 9). In this respect, Shakespeare has been reinterpreted and re-appropriated by new perspectives as far apart from the classical tradition as postcolonial studies or queer theory.

From the ending of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup>, there has been a trend to reverse the traditional image of Shakespeare as part of the established order, in favour of progressive positions which situate his *Ouvre* as part of political ideologies and activism that actually aim at changing the status quo in Western societies. As Sanders says: “There are as many opportunities for divergence as adherence, for assault as well as homage” (9). According to her: “Shakespeare was undoubtedly deployed as a tool of empire, taught in schools across the world as a means of promoting the English language

and the British imperial agenda” (Sanders 52). Through this extensive use, the playwright has become a universal reference, because “If adaptation requires foreknowledge of the source for the system of analogue and juxtaposition to succeed, then Shakespeare is a reliable cultural touchstone, a language ‘we all understand’” (Sanders 52). Or at least, he is a reliable source for an unreliable language used according to different interests, for that reason it is an ambivalent symbol that we all reinterpret.

Thus, Shakespeare has become a kind of global visual icon and an incredible source of cultural experimentation, which seems to have increased his influence since the late decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so judging by the volume of cultural products recently created and more or less in debt with the dramatist’s work. As Sanders explains, a part of “the pleasure of the reading experience must be the tension between the familiar and the new, and the recognition both of similarity and difference, between ourselves and between texts” (14). William Shakespeare remains the highest national cultural icon for Britain, and he has become an object of merchandising in contemporary pop culture. The multiple adaptations and versions of Shakespeare’s works are an undeniable proof of his popularity, from the recognized Kenneth Branagh’s film adaptations to the popular *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)* by The Reduced Shakespeare Company.

If we asked someone in a Western country to mention a play written by the playwright, maybe *Hamlet* would be the answer. Among the texts by Shakespeare which are adapted most regularly there are three plays at the top of the list: *The Tempest*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet* (Sanders 52). Also *Hamlet* has a canonical status in any study of Shakespearean reception and appropriation (Sanders 54). It is especially interesting to study the most recent *Hamlet*’s appropriations done by young adults popular formats, such as fantasy novel and film, comic, and TV series. In this sense, as Douglas Lanier says: “The most important source for innovation has been the speech of youth culture and emergent subcultures, but whatever the source, popular culture is preoccupied with the contemporaneity of style” (59). This is reflected in some recent popular products such as the American series *Sons of Anarchy* (2008-2014) produced by Twentieth Century Fox, and the *manga* version of *Hamlet* (2007) published in U.K. by Self-Made Hero.

As Douglas Lanier explains: “while the plays are transposed into contemporary terms, the language remains Shakespearian” (87). This means that even in the case of adapting the

original play to modern times, the plot and the characters keep the Shakespearian flavour. According to him, this disjunction poses some interesting questions of cultural authority, such as: “is the Shakespearian language being preserved so that it can mythologize pop icons, genres, and attitudes? Or is the pop imagery and style designed to lend Shakespearian poetry a hip currency?” (Lanier 87). Maybe the answer to both questions is affirmative, as the process of adaptation affects both sides of the operation. Thus, the Shakespearian myth confers authority to the pop icon, and at the same time, the pop imagery gives a modern restyling to Shakespeare’s words. This manner, as Sinfield argues: “often it is difficult to say who is using whom: Shakespeare’s plays both confer and receive significance” (156). Thus, there is an exchange between pop culture and Shakespeare’s works.

In the case of the prolific film adaptations of Shakespeare’s works, the relationship between the dramatist and cinema is that proper of an exchange of cultural authority between institutions in a reciprocal process. As Graham Holderness says: “the repute of cinema art and of the film industry can be enhanced by their capacity to incorporate Shakespeare; the institution of Shakespeare itself benefits from that transaction by a confirmation of its persistent universality” (206). Thus, film productions obtain a better reputation by adapting Shakespeare’s plays, while the dramatist widens his universality.

As Lanier explains, “Shakespop typically aims for fidelity elsewhere, in Shakespearian motifs, plot structures, characters, thematic, even atmosphere” (99). This critic also underlines that the value placed on Shakespeare’s complex language does not fit into pop culture, “where complexities are often conveyed non-verbally, through image or performance, particularly so with film and TV, which are certainly capable of a visual sophistication that rivals Shakespeare’s semantic density” (Lanier 99). Thus, even that the film versions usually keep Shakespearian quotations in their script, the language used is adapted to contemporary style to make it more accessible to wider audiences, especially the young.

Shakespeare’s energy is neither created nor destroyed, but it is in constant transformation. Although usually situated in many different settings, suffering many changes and variations, his works keep their powerful effects on the viewers and readers, and they are repeatedly used in full versions or just as quotations in current cultural productions of all kinds, and often of quite opposed natures and diverse intentions.

Thus, *Hamlet* seems to be the true source of inspiration for the original comic *V for Vendetta* and especially for its film version, beyond the revision of the historical facts of the Gunpowder Plot, because it is evident their use of Shakespearean elements and their application with a clear political purpose.

As Lanier says: “Shakespop adaptations are a potential source of innovation and creativity because they transform - reproduce - the Shakespeare they transmit in light of contemporary assumptions, circumstances, and ideologies” (88). I agree with his opinion that popular adaptations perpetuate cultural tradition by offering Shakespeare’s well-known “characters, plots, and themes in new guises and without all that pesky language” (95). However, it is also true that, any new adaptation of a Shakespearean text into a theatre performance, a film or television format, brings a new opportunity for a real updating and new understanding of his words. This chance, as Holderness explains, “seems to entail a liberation of the play from the fettered holy text.” Thus, “any move to challenge the hegemony of a dominant form of ideological oppression must be welcomed” (207), because this offers new possibilities of reinterpretation, appraisal and understanding.

It seems especially interesting Lanier’s idea that: “By stressing the affinities between Shakespeare and popular culture, we return his work to its original popular register, a register governed by visceral power rather than fleeting ideologies or high cultural fashions” (95). If Shakespeare was alive today, maybe he would not write only theatre plays, but also scripts for films and TV series, in so much as these can be considered as a contemporary equivalent to what theatre represented in the past. Nowadays, maybe one of the most popular media to spread stories is the audiovisual format exhibited on the screens of cinemas, televisions, or especially through new technologies, such as computers, tablets and smart phones connected to the internet, which transform the broadcast into a global experience shared by millions of people around the world.

## 2.2. *Hamlet*’s Revolutionary Potential

Shakespeare’s plays show an unquestionable purpose to break conventions and go beyond the established order, with a clear talent to keep people’s attention until the final resolution of the plot. Of all Shakespeare’s plays *Hamlet* passes as one of the most revolutionary ones, where a committed rebel prince has to face revenge jointly with the liberation of the kingdom from an unfair monarch. Here, Shakespeare goes further in his

understanding of revenge tragedy rules, so extending their limits to embrace political revolutionary ideals.

In this sense, *Hamlet* represents the ambition for a coming revolution, as it implies the possibility of social and political change in a near future. The Prince does not restrain himself to a theoretical or an imaginary resolution of problems affecting the kingdom, as he aspires to transform the existing conditions through effective action. Thus, Hamlet has an intellectual mind analyzing the situation, and his reflexive nature is in conflict with his mission. But this delay is only the previous step before facing trouble and being definitely committed to action. As Andrew Cutrofello explains: “Hamlet’s tarrying is revolutionary in this precise sense... Nor, finally, is his tarrying utopian. It is revolutionary in that it seeks to make possible an effective act whose object, at the present moment, is impossible” (93). In this sense, Hamlet’s procrastination could be understood as a revolutionary non-act which needs time to develop because it exceeds the order of what is currently possible.

According to Cutrofello, Hamlet’s delay has been associated both with revolutionary potential and with revolutionary failure since the nineteenth century (94), as he exemplifies the inner struggle between personal doubts and strong duty. While his delay is vital to the development of the play, it also has dramatic implications and brings terrible consequences to the rest of the cast, as his conflict generates a storm of trouble around the main character and his mission. Hamlet is the engine provoking the events in the play, but the true fuel in the plot is revenge. All the characters surrounding Hamlet are affected to some extent by the consequences of his acts or by his doubts, and consequently by his own absence of action. This way, Hamlet’s commitment is double as he pursues vengeance at the same time that he can free the kingdom of Denmark by killing its illegitimate king. In this sense, the mere planning of the murder of the monarch in a play entails a revolutionary ideology at the Elizabethan age. This revolutionary potential, also present in other Shakespearean plays, has strong connections with recent popular cultural products such as *V for Vendetta*, which retakes the topics of revenge, justice, and freedom with a hard violent component.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare settles the story in a past far kingdom, so establishing clear parallelisms with his contemporary Britain. He uses the setting of Denmark and the real distant history of its prince to develop a plot full of political allusions directed to criticize Elizabethan society. Shakespeare employs the conventions of revenge tragedy to present a violent fierce critical drama against a corrupt world which hides its true essence, and which

is only discovered to the audience through the reflections and acts of a lonely thoughtful dissident, Hamlet.

*Hamlet* could be understood as an anti-utopian play conceived to cause an intellectual impact on its audience. Shakespeare sought to show a critical vision of reality in the shape of a revenge tragedy, based on historical facts. Thus, he uses the original real story of prince Hamlet to transform it into a political cultural work, attractive enough to catch people's attention and make them reflect on its content. In this sense, *Hamlet* could be interpreted as an anti-utopian work which compels to action as a way of changing the status quo.

In an article published on the web of the *British Library* (15 March 2016), critic Kiernan Ryan writes:

In *Hamlet* Shakespeare deliberately sabotages the whole genre of revenge tragedy by creating a tragic protagonist who refuses to play the stock role in which he's been miscast by the world he happens to inhabit, calling into question the society that trapped him.

The tragic Prince breaks down all previous conventions about what the audience should expect from a revenge hero, so establishing himself as the one and only of the genre. As Ryan also recognizes: "The more conscious one becomes of how closely Shakespeare's revenge tragedy resembles Kyd's prototype as well as Belleforest's version of Saxo, the more obvious its radical difference from them", because there is a radical difference between *Hamlet* and all the other revenge tragedies of the period.

Conservative critics, more worried about the perpetuation of the status quo, have considered Hamlet's doubts about accomplishing the expected role of the avenging son and his systematic questioning of the whole establishment, as the real origin of the problematic interpretation of this play. The contradictory and critical spirit of Hamlet is what makes the play a different one among all other revenge tragedies. To understand the very revolutionary essence of the play, we first need to appraise the fact that the Prince is not mad at all, but as he himself says "The time is out of joint" (1.5.206); and so as Ryan explains "not being in tune with his time makes Hamlet a hero ahead of his time", thus also becoming a precursor of the modern age.

As Ryan himself wonders: "What if Hamlet's tormented resistance to performing the role of revenger expresses a justified rejection of a whole way of life, whose corruption,



injustice and inhumanity he now sees clearly and rightly finds intolerable?." Thus, Hamlet is consciously rebelling against his world, because for him it is obvious that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.99), as Marcellus tells Horatio shocked by the immoral events which have illegitimately crowned Claudius as the new king, so bringing the total political corruption to the throne.

*Hamlet* is a cry for freedom and a defense of individualism, as the Prince claims for his own independence to decide what to do and how to do it, against the conventions of the society of the time that push him towards the prescribed revenge. As Ryan concludes, the tragedy turns out to be "having to live, love and die on the soul-destroying terms of such a world at all, despite feeling the need and the potential to dwell in a world fit for what human beings could be." Thus, Hamlet fights against his world as it is established, so considering it restrictive and oppressing, because he has the intuition to see the possibilities of individual improvement through social change.

Hamlet feels disappointed because he has just discovered that the world around him is based on appearances, lies and treason, but he wants to be true and to be just himself. He claims in Act 1 "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right!" (1.5.206-7), as he also wants to set his world right, but he gets conscious of the impossibility of his mission when he understands that the success of his revenge will not imply the restitution of justice and fair rule. The kingdom is totally corrupted and loyalties are usually bought, so consolidating an extended web of alliances, silences, and favours to be returned. Hamlet's consciousness brings him to pretend madness as a social disguise which may help him to reveal the true face of reality, making people around him be aware of the truth.

Hamlet realizes that the whole kingdom of Denmark is corrupted, based on the complicity of its society which tolerates and even fosters the commission of crimes as a usual way of life. But as Ryan underlines: "taking revenge could never settle the matter for Hamlet, because the root cause of his troubles lies deeper than his uncle's villainy, as Claudius is merely a product of the barbaric era in which Hamlet finds himself stranded." In this sense, Hamlet's constant doubts and fake insanity serves the unique purpose of taking time and having a convenient coverage to make evident the complete corruption of all levels of society, so showing it to the cast and to the public in the play. Ryan again gives the key idea, explaining that "Shakespeare ensures that Hamlet does avenge his

father in the end. But not before his revolt against his role has revealed Shakespeare's time as a time that only the 'fine revolution' Hamlet glimpses in the graveyard could set right" (Ryan).

As Hamlet enters the graveyard and watches the gravedigger throwing the skulls of those who used to be the rulers and owners of the country, he reflects upon the futility of life and exclaims to Horatio "Here's fine revolution, an we had the trick to see't" (5.1.91-2). Hamlet concludes that everybody is equal in front of death, because death is a kind of universal leveler, which will treat everyone with the same standards and it will retribute each person to his true origin, the earth. The rich and the poor, the literate and the illiterate, all will become dust, so all the wealth and troubles of our world will transform into nothing. And according to Hamlet, we will also disappear, as he does not seem to expect reaching something like heaven or entering hell, but he assumes we will become nothing after death. In fact, the Prince has previously claimed human beings as the most perfect creation of nature, but he has also settle death as the final destiny without any chance for eternal life, or redemption beyond earthly existence:

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties! In form and moving, how express and admirable! In action, how like an angel! In apprehension, how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?. (1.2.323-29)

These ideas, expressed by the character of Hamlet could be considered blasphemous in Shakespeare's time, because they defied the dominant religious convictions while posing some revolutionary questions which challenged the official beliefs of Elizabethan and Jacobean age. In this sense, Hamlet's thoughts were closer to the philosophy of Enlightenment than to the conventions of his own time, being ahead of the forthcoming changes which will transform society. *Hamlet* introduces revolutionary political concepts in the revenge genre such as freedom and equality, besides the basic idea of direct action to reach justice.

*Hamlet* projects the vision of an individual thinker who foresees the possibilities of change in a more or less distant future. It is precisely with this respect that the character of Hamlet can be understood as a revolutionary agent of change, who fosters the evolution of individuals as members of society, so acting for its improvement. Also, consequently, eradicating unfair situations in favour of truth and justice, which can balance the relationship between people and power.

### 3. V FOR VENDETTA: BETWEEN THE DYSTOPIAN FICTION AND THE REVENGE TRAGEDY

*V for Vendetta* is strategically positioned between the dystopian fiction and a modern form of revenge tragedy, so taking key elements from both genres and thus doubly benefiting from them. This work understands *V for Vendetta* as a piece of dystopian fiction which shares elements of the revenge plays, thus becoming a modern revenge dystopian narrative space. In this sense, this work argues, it is difficult to envision the story unfolded in *V for Vendetta* if there were no Shakespeare's tragedies, since the structures of the comic and especially the film version are based upon these revenge tragedies. The characterization of the hero is full of Shakespearean features and even the development of the whole story follows the conventions of revenge plays. In many aspects, it seems that *Hamlet* has served as a deep source of inspiration to build up the story and the character of V.

#### 3.1. The Original Comic and the Film Version

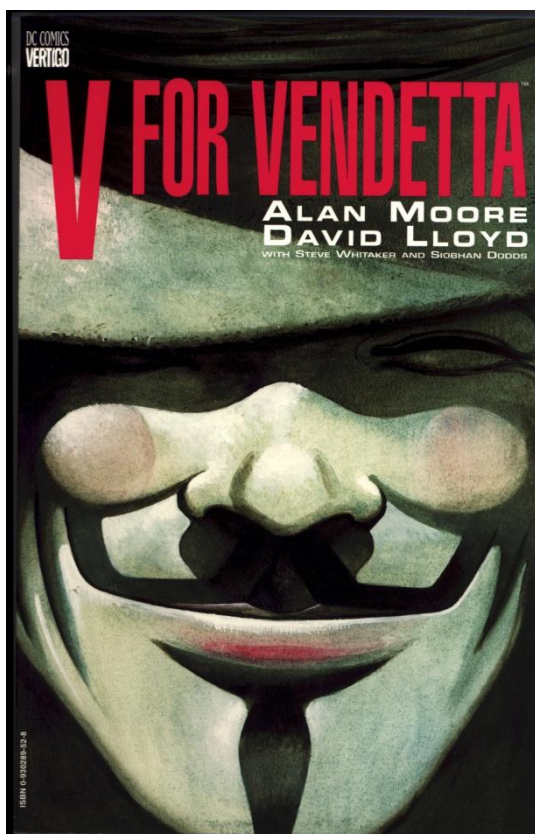
##### 3.1.1. The Origin

As James Chapman affirms in *British Comics: A Cultural History* (2011), in Britain comics have received poor scholar attention, so remaining in the ground of subculture; as it "has never achieved a cultural status or a popular mythology equivalent to American superhero tradition" (2). Thus, the so considered low-culture forms and products have been despised by the formal scholar studies, without giving any chance for new approaches to revise the status quo. In this sense, Chapman considers that popular media such as comics, cinema, television and popular literature "are a valuable but neglected source of social history that provide insights into the societies and cultures in which they were produced and consumed" (6). This way, often we can see these manifestations of subordinate cultures opposing the dominant, but these are discarded as unrepresentative and consequently unworthy of study, so contributing to legitimate the dominant social order.

The "ruling culture does not define the whole culture, though it tries to, and it is the task of the oppositional critic to re-read culture so as to amplify and strategically position the marginalized voices of the ruled, exploited, oppressed, and excluded" (Dollimore 14). Both American and British comics were products of counterculture, showing irreverence against authority, and a permissive attitude in front of alternative lifestyles. However, it seems

paradoxical that “a nation where comics have been so marginalized has nevertheless produced one of the most acclaimed artists and by common consent the most influential modern comic writer”, Alan Moore, (Chapman 5). British writer Alan Moore has a privileged position in the world of comics, being more respected than any other writer, he “is regarded as having brought a level of psychological complexity and critical respectability to the comic book through an extensive body of work that includes *V for Vendetta*” (Chapman 4). Despite the fact that Great Britain has kept comics outside the recognized cultural status, it also has a long tradition of comics for adult readers with a higher emotional and intellectual charge, from the underground of the 1970s to the mainstream of the 1980s, with titles such as *Warrior* magazine, where *V for Vendetta* first was published serialized.

In 1982 Alan Moore and David Lloyd had the idea to draw a political graphic novel against Thatcher’s policy using as the main character a reincarnation of Guy Fawkes, officially considered a culprit for trying to blow up the Parliament in 1605. Moore was responsible for the script and Lloyd was in charge of drawings, so creating the protagonist called V, disguised with a mask, a cape and a hat, evoking the image of the British Catholic conspirator. This choice was in fact a provocative idea under Thatcher’s mandate, and specially in the time of IRA bombing campaign. Just for these reasons, Moore thought the historical figure of the traitor was the appropriate to put the basis for his hero, someone outside the borders of legality, but committed to a greater cause. As Lewis Call explains, “Guy Fawkes and Bonfire Night now signify not Catholic terrorism but devolution, local autonomy, working class rejection of Thatcherite social and economic conservatism, and a radical critique of Anglo-American militarism” (159). Someone who deserved a second chance to prove his thoughts maybe were right; or at least he could have the right to put into practice his ideas in another time and another context.



Picture 1. Cover of the complete edition of the comic.

Moore and Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* was first published by *British Warrior* in black and white, as a serial comic from 1982 to 1985, when the magazine closed. After getting several offers, in 1988 American publisher DC Comics got the rights to reprint and continue the series using pastel colours, and finally it was edited as a complete graphic novel. The hero of the book is an anarchist known as V, who fights against a fictional fascist state under the totalitarian rule of the Chancellor, a reflection of Thatcher's government of the time. *V for Vendetta* depicts the rise of an imaginary fascist regime, describing the access to power of Norsefire party, while V argues that common people were responsible for the success of fascism because they exchanged individual freedom for security. In the original comic, the ultimate reason for this totalitarian rise was a post-nuclear war scenery; while in the film version, it was the panic after a biological terrorist attack and the fear of other epidemic outbreaks, so reflecting what society has considered a serious threat in each historical moment.



Picture 2. A scene from the original comic, depicting the fascist ideology of the Chancellor's government.

Raffaella Baccolini thinks that the critical dystopias of recent decades are the product of our dark times; and also they urge us to act as “By looking at the formal and political features of science fiction, we can see how these works point us toward change” (521). In this sense, although the graphic novel and the film version correspond to different times and countries, consequently addressing different political situations, both periods have many points in common as they represent historical moments of social confusion and political oppression. Even more interestingly, those kinds of historical periods tend to return more often than wished, so cultural products such as the dystopian fiction represented in *V for Vendetta* serve to catalyze a bunch of sensations, fears, desires, and hopes no matter the time, no matter the place. Thus, the original comic contains valuable ideas able to be adapted to new social and political circumstances, proving its validity to resist the pass of time from the moment of its creation up to now.

Dystopian fiction looks at the present through the mirror of the future. As a kind of exorcism, it reflects a distorted vision of reality and projects nowadays society's fears and nightmares into the future. Dystopia or negative utopia is characterized by exploring, and sometimes denouncing, possible or hypothetical dangerous developments in nowadays society. In this sense, dystopia is much more anchored in the present than classical utopias; it doesn't depart from the reason or the moral principles to elaborate an ideal model, instead it deduces a future nightmare world from the transposition of present realities (López Keller 15).

On the other hand, for Baccolini science fiction is regarded as a potentially subversive genre, as it is outside the standard of high culture, as a taboo or a cultural sub-product. Thus, it has become “a form of counternarrative to hegemonic discourse. In its extrapolation of the present, it has the potential to envision different worlds that can work as a purely imaginative (at worst) or a critical (at best) exploration of our society” (519). Maybe this is the definition which best fits the essence and the purpose of *V for Vendetta*, firstly as the original comic being an example of subversive cultural sub-product criticizing Thatcher’s government, and later as the film adaptation becoming a product of popular culture attacking Bush’s administration.



Picture 3. Frame from the film, showing a forbidden work of art comparing explicitly UK, US, and Nazism.

The most remarkable features of *V* are representative of the subversive potential of the genre, as he quotes repeatedly Shakespeare’s works as a recurrent alibi for his activism, while he always wears a Guy Fawkes mask to cover his face, disfigured by fire when escaping from a government’s resettlement camp. He is highly instructed in the arts of combat and he is an expert in explosives, but he is also highly self-educated in literature, rhetoric, and politics, as probes the number of titles that are present on the shelves of his refuge. The choice of Fawkes as a basic reference for *V* is quite significant, thus retaking his unfinished mission in a new context. For Call, in *V for Vendetta*, “the image of Fawkes

signifies freedom of a distinctively left-libertarian sort” (156). Moore uses his hero as a kind of reborn Guy Fawkes, an allegorical figure who demands justice and freedom.

The graphic novel, compiling the serial comic edition, was divided in three parts: “Europe After the Reign”, “Vicious Cabaret”, and “The Land of Do What You Want”. Every chapter in the book has a title which begins with the letter V, reinforcing the concept of the comic as a unity which is pervaded with the influence of its charismatic protagonist. It also gives a sense of smooth continuity between the different episodes which develop the story of the avenger. Thus, the contents of the book are linked to each other, while deploying a dense intellectual argumentation full of constant references to literature, music, and politics. In fact, the political allusions to anarchy are direct and clear in the script written by Moore, as the necessary ideology to counteract the fascist regime which rules Britain.

The comic in its complete edition includes a clarifying preface by both authors, Lloyd and Moore, giving details about their political ideas and their intentions when creating the story of V. As Chapman explains, “a historical approach to the study of popular culture understands that it is both a product of social processes and that it also plays a role in constructing social values” (6). Thus, Lloyd introduces the novel to an adult public, saying that *V for Vendetta* “is for people who don’t switch the news” (5). Moore adds personal comments about the political climate at the time of conceiving the comic, as he says: “Margaret Thatcher is entering her third term in office and talking confidently of an unbroken Conservative leadership well into the next century”, ruling against minorities and transforming Britain into a miserable country (6). Thus, showing openly his disagreement with national policy in 1988.





Picture 4. Scene from the comic where V refuses Justice in favour of Anarchy as his true teacher.

In the interesting article “Behind the Painted Smile”, which accompanies the edition of *V for Vendetta* as a complete graphic novel by DC Comics, Alan Moore acknowledges a long and varied list of influences, such as:

Orwell. Huxley. Thomas Disch. *Judge Dredd*. Harlan Ellison’s “*Repent, Harlequin!*, said the Ticktockman”. *Catman* and *The Prowler in the City at the Edge of the World* by the same author. Vincent Price’s *Dr. Phibes* and *Theatre of Blood*. David Bowie. *The Shadow*. *Night Raven*. *Batman*. *Fahrenheit 451*. The writings of the New Worlds school of science fiction. Max Ernst’s painting “*Europe After the Rain*”. Thomas Pynchon. The atmosphere of British Second World War films. *The Prisoner*. Robin Hood. Dick Turpin... (Moore 273)

In this list there is a prominent role for classical dystopian references, as it was first reflected in the graphic novel, which is clearly a dystopian story full of influences from the classical works of dystopian fiction, mainly from George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), among others. The message is simple and effective, as the comic and the later film version create a future imaginary world which is an evident parallel of a present reality, so searching to make people think about their own society with the aim of taking actions to improve it.

In dystopian fiction freedom is restricted and there is no right to dissent with the established power which controls the society, through the shape of big political and/or economical corporations which use their propaganda, their products and their policies to exert control, which can be “technological, bureaucratic and philosophical”, as Namrata Purkar classifies it (2). He also admits that dystopian literature shows certain prominent

characteristics “such as the portrayal of a society where people worship either a concept or a figurehead”, where the protagonist questions the existing social and political systems; but it is only through the protagonist that the readers become aware of the adverse aspects of the dystopian world (Purkar 2-3). In this sense, in *V for Vendetta*, V is the revolutionary hero against the system, first fighting alone, but slowly catching the attention and progressively gaining the implication of citizenship to change the corrupt order in which they live.

Also María Josefa Erreguerena remarks that dystopian heroes have to face social institutions to claim for their freedom and save not only themselves but also the rest of their community. These heroes propose stereotypes and values which represent some hope against the highly efficient totalitarian institutions which rule implacably (570). This is the case of the graphic novel adapted to film, *V for Vendetta*, and as a novelty it offers a pinch of hope among the absolute dehumanizing devastating chaos and the complete human alienation under the totalitarian control described. The main character represents the only singular resistance to oppression, so trying to mobilize a passive citizenship dominated by panic. In this sense, as Baccolini affirms, “awareness and responsibility are the conditions of the critical dystopia’s citizens... the critical dystopia’s open ending leaves its characters to deal with their choices and responsibilities” (521). This feature is especially present in the film version, when finally people react against the government once assumed their own responsibility as citizens.

The first scenes in the graphic novel are paradigmatic of the dystopian fiction, showing a bleak future world close to Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where people are controlled by cameras and the government gives the only information accepted as true through the emission of the Voice of Destiny broadcast to the whole nation. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has an everlasting influence over works such as *V for Vendetta*; because after the updating revisions of film adaptations, it has been finally understood as a more general attack against all types of repressive totalitarian politics (Erreguerena 567), although originally conceived as a hard critique to Stalin’s regime.

In 1984, Oceania is a country ruled by the Big Brother, who is the leader of the totalitarian government and the Party, which exerts its rule through ministries with euphemistic names such as the Ministry of Truth, the Ministry of Peace, and the Ministry of Love, which in fact mean exactly the opposite to what they suggest. The Party uses the

propaganda and technology to control its citizens creating slogans like: “War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, and Ignorance is Strength” (Orwell 6). All these *Orwellian* features are remarkably similar to the futuristic England depicted in *V for Vendetta*, with institutional slogans used by government such as “Strength Through Unity, Unity Through Faith”, or “England prevails”.

In fact, V first appears as an anti-hero, a kind of rare character, who seems a psychopath because of his aspect and his speech. Thus, he introduces himself in the comic as a villain, the black sheep in the flock, citing Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, while unexpectedly coming out from shadows to save Evey from the secret police called “fingers”.



Picture 5. V makes his presentation quoting Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.

### 3.1.2. The Film

The comic and the film are included in the genre of dystopian fiction, following the most representative characteristics of the classic works of this genre. Though, *V for Vendetta* introduces some variations from the classics which contribute to update the genre, widening its impact and influence. Especially the film version makes interesting modifications and some planned changes, so contributing to make the critical aspects that were present in the graphic novel even more fierce, containing a deep political charge aimed to shake citizenship's consciousness.

According to James R. Keller, a film such as *V for Vendetta* "is not only dependent upon the graphic novel exclusively, but mirrors and quotes a wide variety of texts and mediums", which include literature, cinema, history, medicine, painting, music, and politics (4). In fact, the film version has an eclectic source of influences also comparable to that of Moore's creation, making additions such as reproducing the dark atmosphere of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982).

The first scene of the comic is also reproduced in the film version increasing the features of the main character as an action hero, defeating the group of attacking rivals in combat, using his fists and his characteristic daggers. Besides, the comic describes the relationship between V and Evey as a kind of master-pupil one, while the film forces an impossible romantic affair to enhance the dramatic effect of the story. But this love is doomed since the very beginning because of the fate of the hero, as he is committed with personal revenge together with the liberation of the nation as his unique unquestionable mission.



Picture 6. The poster for the film adaptation.

The film adaptation was produced and written by the Wachowski brothers for Warner Bros, and directed by a member of their technical crew in *Matrix*, McTeigue. It was conceived as a Hollywood blockbuster based on Moore and Lloyd's original comic, which in fact was quite radical, with a big budget to create an action movie for the entertainment of young public. The film has also proved to have a quite revolutionary political core, which it was revealed after its release and the multiple reactions it has provoked, thus keeping the intentions of the original comic. The film adaptation is quite respectful with the essence of the main character even we could think the powerful presence of the hero is enhanced by the resources of cinema. Obviously, there are some changes in the plot and the construction of characters which contribute to make the visual narration nearer to nowadays times. In fact, the release of the film was surrounded by polemics because it showed a violent hero fighting against the system, after the radical Muslim terrorist attacks in US and especially after the recent bombings in London public transport.

Adaptations such as the film *V for Vendetta* are aesthetic objects in their own right, although we have to remember that "it is only as inherently double or multilaminated

works that they can be theorized as adaptations”, but this nature “does not mean that fidelity to the adapted text should be the criterion of judgement or the focus of analysis” (Hutcheon 6). Adaptation is repetition without replication, as to adapt means to make some adjustments to have a particular work suitable again to other environment or to fit new purposes. Thus, according to Linda Hutcheon, an adaptation is an announced transposition of a work or works, a “transcoding” which can involve a shift of medium or genre, or a change of frame and context (7). But the act of adaptation is also a process of creation which entails “both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation” (8); and as we experience adaptations as palimpsests thanks to “our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation”, adaptation is a form of intertextuality from the perspective of its process of reception (8).

As the film *V for Vendetta* is based upon a graphic novel, it is intertextual from its own genesis, “paralleling the text from which it was derived, the details of the corresponding narratives constantly interpreting and reinterpreting each other as they interact and diverge for a variety of pragmatic, conceptual, aesthetic, and inadvertent purposes” (Keller 3). Thus generating evocative interpretive structures in the mind of the readers and viewers, from the parallel universes created by the interplay between the original comic and the film version, but also between the varied references to artifacts of both high and low cultures, in this case mainly Shakespearean influences and allusions interacting with popular cultural products such as comic and fiction cinema.

On the other hand, despite the fact of recognizing that comic books are highly innovative in cultural forms, as Call explains, for most of the twentieth century they had been excluded from that privileged canon of works thought to be suitable subjects for literary criticism; comics, along with science fiction and pornography were classified as “paraliteratures” (Call 160). In this area of “paraliteratures”, dystopian adaptations have been prolific while they have resorted to visual and narrative resources beyond the boundaries of dystopian sci-fi, mixing other genres such as *noir* or horror to convey new meanings inside the boundaries of Dystopian fiction, as it is also the case of *V for Vendetta*.

For Baccolini the mixing of genres is a key factor that makes these dystopian novels sites of resistance and oppositional texts thanks to their blending of different genre conventions (520). A hybrid factor which is present in *V for Vendetta*, taking elements from other genres far from dystopias and making use of them to reinforce different aspects

of the story. Thus, we have detective Finch's investigation as a clear example of *noir* cinema adding the thrilling effect; while there are other punctual elements taken from biopic which give a more dramatic tone to the whole story, as the narration of Valerie's life. Besides the story of V contains many references from the horror genre too, so making us sympathize with the hero with all the suffering inflicted in the resettlement camp until he finally escapes although disfigured by fire. There are also moments to release the tension which are in debt with the comedy, especially the scene which parodies chancellor Sutler in a live television programme, as if it was part of Benny Hill's show, so using humor as a corrosive weapon to criticize the establishment. Even the prologue, which initially settles the historical background of the film, uses the conventions of historical cinema to tell the story of Guy Fawkes and the Treason Plot, so giving credibility to the entire narration that follows.

One of the most interesting changes made by the film adaptation of the comic is precisely the addition of a kind of historical prologue, conceived as a dramatized introduction of the Gunpowder Treason and the character of Guy Fawkes, as the main representative of this Catholic conspiracy against the government, showing how he was sentenced to death. This is the beginning of the film, which serves to present Fawkes to global audiences not aware of British history, but it also presents the ideological premise which will guide V through the story, his personal struggle against government.

The hero is introduced to the audience rescuing the female protagonist, Evey, from a gang of corrupt policemen who were going to rape her. But in the film version, the character of Evey is reinforced and gets a greater weight in the story with respect to the original one. The Wachowskis' script transforms Evey into a more confident and intelligent young woman, who lost her parents as a consequence of government's repressive policy, while in the comic she appears as a poor and frail girl who was going to resort to prostitution to earn a living. Using Natalie Portman to act the role of Evey also contributes to give a halo of glamour and charisma to the female character.

In fact, the film benefits from a well selected casting, as it is especially remarkable Hugo Weaving interpretation of V because of the difficulty of acting with a smiling mask during all the film, basically relying on the modulation and inflections of his voice to convey his mood. The choice of Stephen Rea to act the part of inspector Finch enriches the original character with personal shades which help to understand the development of the

whole story, as often he becomes the main narrator in the film, because we discover V's plans while he unfolds his investigation. Besides, the interpretation of the Chancellor by John Hurt is not casual at all, as the same actor performed Winston Smith in Michael Radford's film version of *1984*. Then the link between both works is established consciously by the shooting crew of *V for Vendetta*, also cunningly changing the original name of Adam Susan by Adam Sutler, more appropriate to make it rhyme with Hitler, the dictator who serves as a reference to build the fictional character.



Picture 7. Scene from the film with the Norsefire party fascist paraphernalia, and Chancellor Sutler giving his speech to the people.

*V for Vendetta* is also in debt with Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner*, and similarly it has most of its scenes in a nocturnal atmosphere or in dark inner settings, which contribute to enhance the feeling of oppression, clandestine life, and constant threat. In *Blade Runner* the rebellion is originated by a small group of replicants-slave-like workers - who are persecuted by a special police section called Blade Runners to eliminate them. Rick Deckard, actor Harrison Ford, is in charge of the searching mission and develops an investigation which remembers the work of special police officer Eric Finch, interpreted by Stephen Rea, in the film *V for Vendetta*. Finch parallels the unexpected discoveries of Deckard which ultimately will change his perspective towards the power in rule and the



supposedly dangerous representatives of rebellion. Finally, he sympathizes with the rebels and their insurgent cause, while he reveals to the readers and spectators the direct implication of government in the chemical experimentation on humans and the calculated massive biological infection of population to create panic and justify repressive policies.

From *Blade Runner* on, and as we approached the beginning of the new millennium, the trend in dystopias has been increasingly towards giving some pinch of hope to the possibilities of changing and redressing personal stories and also humankind's fate. Baccolini precisely explains this crucial point in the evolution of dystopian fiction as she considers that utopia is maintained in dystopia, as: "recent novels allow readers and protagonists to hope: the ambiguous, open endings maintain the utopian impulse within the work" (520). Thus, there is an interesting change in this traditionally bleak genre without space for hope, which shows a dark future we only could escape as readers outside the story by considering dystopia as a warning.

If the original comic was a success, the Wachowski brothers' film version would increase its impact and influence until really unexpected limits. According to cultural materialism, the main function of cinema as a cultural industry in a bourgeois economy is to reproduce and naturalize dominant ideologies, but there is also scope for some unusual projects which defy the established ideological position of cinema in society, and by the way try to subvert the basis of that society. This seems to be the case of the film *V for Vendetta*, which since its release in 2005, has unchained a global wave of reactions which prove its deep social impact. The most evident effect has come when Time Warner decided to produce massively V's mask as part of the film's merchandising, but the masks have appeared in thousands of demonstrations and activist claims around the planet, even used by Anonymous group from 2007 on (Ortiz).



Picture 8. The mask and the logo of V from the film.

Like most Hollywood films, *V for Vendetta* is designed to appeal to a youthful audience, but it also contains features which may nurture further thought, protest and even action against the system (Williams 18). As Call says, “Thanks to Moore and Lloyd, the face of Fawkes took over newsstands in Britain and the USA during the 80’s; thanks to the Wachowskis and McTeigue, it took over billboards, cinema screens and televisions in the early twenty-first century” (156). Thus, the influence of these two works, but especially the effects of the film version are still pervading on our society nowadays.

### 3.2. Shakespeare and Guy Fawkes: Facts and Fiction in *V for Vendetta*

A cult comic and a controversial blockbuster put together two apparently opposite symbols: Shakespeare as the representative of the establishment and Fawkes as the image of treason. The real history of both has also served as inspiration for multiple speculations about their true personalities and ideologies, giving rise to many different theories and fictional stories of all kind. But the first time both historical representatives form part of a common story, and thus also become fiction characters, is in *V for Vendetta*. The comic and the film version put them together in the same story as vital parts of the plot from the beginning to the end of the narration. Both are employed by Moore and also the Wachowski brothers as emblems for their historical value, that is, as cultural and political references.

V wouldn't exist without both Guy Fawkes and William Shakespeare. He is the result of a weird intersection which in fact reveals more points in common than expected, related to politics, religion, life, and love. While the first gives the dramatic and heroic background, the bizarre appearance and external elements; the second provides the character with all the necessary consistence and challenging attitude typical of Shakespearean plays. V is directly inspired by Guy Fawkes and all his historical charge, but it is also true that the presence of Shakespearean features is absolutely crucial in the process of building an original character with a mission to accomplish, following his own values usually against the established laws, seeking justice at any cost. Although V is more resolute than Hamlet, because Shakespeare keeps the religious connotations in the Prince's doubts about the consequences of his acts and the punishment he can find after death.

Shakespeare and Guy Fawkes were coetaneous, but represent the opposite sides of socio-political commitment. While the playwright has been officially considered as the Protestant embodiment of the establishment of that time; Fawkes has been labeled as the Catholic traitor who attempted to blow up the Parliament in the Gunpowder Plot on 5<sup>th</sup> of November of 1605. Thus, Fawkes historically has appeared as a kind of primal terrorist, whose fanatical beliefs led him to try to kill all the representatives of Protestant power reunited in the Parliament. This failed terrorist attack has been remembered through time as the triumph of the established order, with the celebration of the Bonfire Night every 5<sup>th</sup> of November with the burning of dummies dressed as Guy Fawkes in public places and big fireworks, while reciting the popular verse: "Remember, remember, the Fifth of November: the Gunpowder Treason and Plot. I know of no reason why the Gunpowder Treason should ever be forgot."

Shakespeare's attitude toward the Gunpowder Plot and Catholicism have been revised over time. The most direct reference to the conspirators and their trial appears in *Macbeth* (2.3.8-11): "Faith, here's an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven. Oh, come in, equivocator". According to Michael Friedman, the playwright's allusion to Father Henry Garnet, the Jesuit "equivocator" sent to damnation in the Hell's Porter scene of *Macbeth*, have been used historically by critics to stress the Protestant viewpoint of Shakespeare with respect to the Catholic conspirators and his defense of the established order (118); and this has been the most common interpretation for a long time.

It seems unbelievable that Shakespeare could be considered an ally for the reincarnation of Guy Fawkes as V, especially if we take into account that the playwright is thought to have written *Macbeth* as a tribute to King James, after the executions of the conspirators. Thus, *Macbeth* contains direct negative allusions to these conspirators and their confessor, Jesuit Father Henry Garnet, who was also executed for treason in 1606, as accused of being part of the Gunpowder Conspiracy.

*Macbeth*'s words reflect the shock and horror experienced by those who supported the King and felt the law and order dangerously threatened. But recently some critics have argued that despite *Macbeth* has been considered a Protestant play for long there are several clues which hint a more sympathetic attitude toward Catholic conspirators than could be expected. According to Friedman, one of the most evident clues is located in the scene when Malcolm praises Edward the Confessor (4.3.147-60), so the Catholic King appears as a true representative of virtue and religious miracles (121); consequently, adding a different shade of meaning to the play.

Also some scholars, such as Stephen Greenblatt, Peter Ackroyd, and Clare Asquith, speculate about Shakespeare's religious beliefs, as he himself could be secretly a Catholic. Beyond speculations, it seems proved that there were family connections between Shakespeare and the conspirators, as his daughter Judith was married with Richard Catesby, the leader of the conspiracy. The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has shown "a critical and biographical counter-trend that accentuates, even in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's sympathy for the Catholic cause" (Friedman 118). *V for Vendetta* participates in this revision of the playwright's filiation as Friedman explains, because the film "enlists Shakespeare, and the cultural capital he carries with him, on the side of the Catholic opponents to English tyranny" (118). Thus, Shakespeare is shown as a supporter of rebellion.

By aligning Shakespeare with Guy Fawkes a kind of extraordinary transgression is operated. The symbol of the British high culture, assumed as an immutable part of British identity and the established order, comes to the side of the revolution. The sacred institution of Shakespeare, so tagged and appropriated by the conservative wings of society, is subverted and transformed into a powerful ideological weapon at the service of anti-system activism. That which for many would be considered as a sacrilege, it is interpreted by many others as a liberating operation of massive effects. Thus, while freeing the Bard from the constrictive and fossilized vision institutionalized along centuries by official

instances, Shakespeare's work is opened to all types of political revisions, perhaps closer to his original spirit.

### 3.3. A Modern Revenge Tragedy: Appropriation and Updating

#### 3.3.1. Appropriating Shakespeare

*V for Vendetta* could be understood as an example of the intertextual web of influences and references which apply to many contemporary cultural products, and also as a paradigmatic work which exemplifies the theory of intertextuality put forward by Julia Kristeva. This theory, as Keller explains, "argues that other cultural artifacts and processes resemble language insofar as they refer only to other cultural products" (4); that is, they get their meaning as they make reference to other cultural productions. Thus, we may say that a film such as *V for Vendetta* is "constantly interpenetrated by other aesthetic, social, historical, political, cultural, and other types of productions" (Keller 4). In this sense, the original comic by Moore and its film adaptation by McTeigue create a fair play between them, and also between each one of them and the multiple cultural references they use to tell their story. With this respect, we should keep in our minds that adaptations are "a kind of intertextuality if the receiver is acquainted with the adapted text" (Hutcheon 21); that is, knowing the references and sources used in that process to interpret the work correctly.

According to Keller: "the collision between parallel textual universes generates meaning" (4). This is the case of *V for Vendetta* and its many mentions to authors such as Pynchon, Yeats, Blake, etc; but especially its remarkable quotations of Shakespeare because of the symbolical value they confer to the main character and to the development of the plot. In this sense, Shakespearean references are really important in the original comic, but they are even reinforced in the film version, making some variations with respect to the graphic novel, strengthening the relationship and the identification between V and Elizabethan drama tragic characters. Thus, we have to remember that part of the pleasure of experiencing an adaptation "comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise" (Hutcheon 4), because adaptations are not only reproductions.

As Sanders says: “Adaptations and appropriations can vary in how explicitly they state their intertextual purpose” (2). Sometimes this will involve a director’s personal vision, and it may also bring cultural relocation or some kind of updating; while other times this reinterpetative act could involve the movement into a new generic mode or context (2). This is the case of *V for Vendetta*, which could be considered the result of a personal project; first, by Alan Moore as a graphic novel, and then as a film by the Wachowski brothers, as these authors are the responsible of the scripts for both projects. These projects involve a personal vision and also an adaptation to a new context. But I am not only referring to the more obvious change from comic to film; because there is a deeper generic move from classical Shakespeare’s repertoire to political graphic novel and movie.

Moore and the Wachowskis seem to pursue a personal mission, and we can take the words of Sanders as a reference to understand it:

In appropriations the intertextual relationship may be less explicit, but what is often inescapable is the fact that a political or ethical commitment shapes a writer’s, director’s, or performer’s decision to re-interpret a source text. (Sanders 2)

The fact of using Shakespeare’s works as a constant source of citation in both the graphic novel and the film underlines what Sanders explains as that inherent intertextuality of literature, which “encourages the ongoing, evolving production of meaning, and an ever-expanding network of textual relations” (3). Thus, creating a kind of almost infinite web of connections and interrelations between old and new works.

With respect to the methods used by the novel and the film, but especially by the last one, to achieve its personal political message, it is advisable to follow the crucial distinctions made by Sanders to understand the operations of adaptation and appropriation. She points out that it is necessary to distinguish between direct quotation and acts of citation; because “quotation can be deferential or critical, supportive or questioning”, depending on the context in which it takes place. While “citation, however, presumes a more deferential relationship; it is frequently self-authenticating, even reverential, in its reference to the canon of ‘authoritative’, culturally validated, texts” (4). Both methods are present in *V for Vendetta*, especially in the film version.

Going further in the techniques developed by the Wachowskis, they seem to apply more complex approaches of adaptation and appropriation, such as *bricolage* and pastiche. Following again the arguments of Sanders:

Adaptation and appropriation are inevitably involved in the performance of textual echo and allusion, but this does not usually equate to the fragmentary *bricolage* of quotation more commonly understood as the operative mode of intertextuality. In French, *bricolage* is the term for ‘Do-it-yourself’ (DIY), which helps to explain its application in a literary context to those texts that assemble a range of quotations, allusions, and citations from existent works of art. (Sanders 4)

The creation of a new work reassembling fragments from other pieces is considered an active postmodernist creative element, also present in *V for Vendetta*. According to Sanders, the act of *bricolage* shades into the literary practice of pastiche, although in art and literature “pastiche has undergone a further shift or extension of reference, being applied most often to those works which carry out an extended imitation of the style of a single artist or writer” (5). As it seems to happen in *V for Vendetta*, with its recurrent use of cultural references and especially Shakespearean allusion, as Sanders continues explaining, “In some respects there is often a complicated blend of admiration and satire at play in pastiches of particular authors or literary styles” (5). Blend which is also deployed in the film *V for Vendetta* with its mixture of elements from diverse cultural traditions.

This way, the Wachowskis’ employment of elements from revenge tragedies is a useful mixture of tragic and comical resources to invest the hero with the aesthetic and moral values from the Shakespearean heroes. In *V for Vendetta*, especially in the film version, there are moments when *bricolage* and pastiche are together in play. As Sanders says: “we acknowledge that stylistic imitation is neither the essence nor sole purpose of the approach to the source text, even though it may be a defining feature” (5). Thus, when assigning a political or ethical commitment to acts of literary appropriation of canonical texts such as Shakespeare’s works in this case, the political aim prevails and justifies the methods used, proving the aesthetical or stylistic exercise secondary, although important.

*V for Vendetta* becomes the weapon shot by V, but previously charged in equal proportions by Fawkes revolutionary powder and Shakespeare cultural rhetoric. If the final result of the film version produces such a powerful cultural weapon, it is just through this combination of intellectual elements, precisely selected and used in the right moments, providing political density aimed at a receptive audience. As Friedman argues, the film

version revises the Gunpowder Plot and Shakespeare's attitude towards the conspirators, as it uses some verses from *Sonnets* and *Macbeth* with a new and radical pro-Catholic meaning, but "It also evokes *Hamlet* and other plays to point out its employment of revenge tragedy elements that shape the audience's reception of V as a flawed, but ultimately tragic hero, a freedom fighter rather than a terrorist" (130). Interestingly, Friedman points out the combined use of political intentions with typical features of revenge plays.

Moore also applies other Shakespearean references to his original plot with the purpose to give support to V's anarchism, as a true ideology which can combine destruction and creation, so justifying extreme violence as a necessary method to change the situation. Thus, according to the notes included in his graphic novel, he also quotes *Henry VIII* (1.4. 75), "O Beauty, 'til now I never knew thee", in another scene where V refuses Justice as an unfaithful companion, in favour of Anarchy, which has taught him that "Justice is meaningless without freedom" (Moore 41).

In fact, in *V for Vendetta*, there are several forces interacting, such as historical facts, a revenge story, an action movie, political ideas, and cultural references, to create a complex product which can be read at different levels of depth. It is frequent, as Sanders claims, that "adaptations adapt other adaptations", because "there is a filtration effect taking place, a cross-pollination; we are observing mediations through culture, practice, and history that cannot be underestimated" (13). These mediations are also taking part in *V for Vendetta*.

Both the novel and the film, and especially the last one, deploy elements that seem taken from the original tradition of popular adaptation which was used by the English Comedians to represent Shakespeare's plays across Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. As they performed these plays in an extremely abridged way, but also as a variety show, including clowning, music, etc. McTeigue's film version also follows the schedule of a variety show to introduce Shakespearean references mixed with humour sketches and action scenes. The effect achieved is comparable to that sought by the English Comedians, so as a result the audience's attention is caught.

In the film version V's first words are a quotation from different passages of *Macbeth*, reciting this in the course of a fight against a group of corrupt policemen who assaulted the



female protagonist, Evey. Here, for the first time, as an introduction of the character's intentions, the quotations are used to justify the execution of the villains. According to Friedman, the scene is taken from the original graphic novel, where Alan Moore quotes the Bloody Captain profusely, and this is precisely the character who swears against the Gunpowder Plot in *Macbeth*; thus reversing *Macbeth's* negative attitude toward the conspiracy, as "Lines that once expressed loathing for Macdonwald and admiration for Macbeth now signify Shakespeare's praise of V, the heroic re-embodiment of the conspirator Guy Fawkes" (125). This way, Shakespeare's words are reinterpreted with a new meaning.



Picture 9. V's introductory fighting against police officers while quoting Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

In the film's initial fight scene, the Wachowski brothers insert a quotation from *Hamlet* (3.1.52-55), instead of the *Macbeth's* lines which were in Moore's original comic: "We are oft to blame in this: 'Tis too much prov'd, that with devotion's visage, and pious action we do sugar o'er the devil himself". Friedman explains that these lines were originally spoken by Polonius to Ophelia, when he gave her a Bible to feign religious pray, but here they refer to the hypocrisy of government who abuse citizens instead of protecting them, and also serves to compare V to Hamlet "as a revenger seeking retribution against an authority figure whose own crimes render him unfit for his office" (126). Thus, once more, reversing Shakespeare's words to give support to V.

As the Wachowski brothers increase and widen the scope of their quotations beyond those of the original novel, they also include interesting additions. Thus, as Friedman explains, in the film V cites Shakespeare's *Sonnet 55*, but changing the original intention of keeping the memory of a young man's beauty by addressing to Guy Fawkes as a promise to preserve his legacy (124). With this change of addressee Shakespeare and Guy Fawkes are aligned in the same cause with V's. They are revealed as V's heroes, their allied and associates to pursue his mission. In the film, V also quotes from *Richard III* : "And thus I clothe my naked villainy with odd old ends, stol'n forth of Holy Writ, and seem a saint, when most I play the devil" (1.3.336-38). In this scene he kills the pervert pederast Bishop Lilliman, when he tries to kill V with a gun hidden inside a fake Bible. According to Friedman, the quotation alludes to the Duke of Gloucester's soliloquy, this time used to underline the corruption of the state in all its spheres, including religion (126); and thus using Shakespeare's words to justify V's violent acts.

Besides enhancing Shakespeare's quotations, in the film there is a new reference which does not appear in Moore's original graphic novel, as Evey is revealed that she had performed the role of Viola in *Twelfth Night*. According to Williams, this character is not only "one of Shakespeare's most resilient heroines but also a character who appears in a delightful romantic comedy in which issues of gender and cross-dressing appear as predominant features" (22). Thus, contributing to give more dramatic weight to the female protagonist of the film version.

But among all the Shakespearean quotations introduced by the Wachowskis in their film version, there is a remarkable presence of *Hamlet's* words instead of *Macbeth's* passages. Possibly this change obeys to the fact that in Moore's graphic novel maybe his intention is to establish solid links between V and Guy Fawkes, so he resorts to the play which more directly alludes to the Gunpowder Plot, consequently reinforcing the historical connection between Shakespeare and the Catholic conspirator. On the other hand, the film adaptation takes many cites from *Hamlet*, besides keeping many others from *Macbeth* and other Shakespearean works, with the purpose of creating a clear relationship between V and Shakespeare's revenge tragedy heroes. As this dramatic type seems to be the one which best fits to the aim of the film and its individualistic protagonist, so showing a lonely doomed hero strongly committed with a mission which entails his own destruction.

### 3.2.2. Updating Revenge Tragedies

As Keller affirms: “The indebtedness of *V for Vendetta* is not limited to textual allusion, quotation, appropriation, or influence” (5). In fact, the film version accentuates some features also present in the original comic, going even beyond in the employment of cultural references which could help for its dramatic effect and its political purposes. As we have seen, *V for Vendetta* uses Shakespearean quotations from other plays apart from *Macbeth*. This is so “to signal the film’s employment of the conventions of Renaissance revenge tragedy” (Friedman 118). In this sense, V could be considered a modern protagonist of a typical revenge play. He has been cruelly treated and disfigured, but he cannot obtain legitimate justice because his offenders are part of the authorities. Then, the only possibility of having justice is through revenge, by killing the responsible of his torture.

As in other revenge tragedies, the hero pursues his vengeance planning cautiously the murders of his offenders, using violent methods and showing no mercy, also causing the death of innocent people in the process of punishing the guilty. All this could put the protagonist to the level of the villains in the story, so finally the hero must pay with his own life as the price for bloody revenge. As Alan Urquhart explains: “the idea of the stage revenger tends to bring into question the nobility essential to the character of the tragic hero” (57). Also we know that “the duty of revenge must have tragic consequences for the revenger” (Urquhart 57), as in the case of Hamlet, but also in other cases such as Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi*.

In the film, before dying and after a long list of murders, V kills the fascist dictator, Adam Sutler. But what prevents viewers from considering him as a terrorist is the use of “Shakespeare’s allusions to indicate V’s function as the hero of a revenge play, who achieves tragic status by sacrificing himself for his cause and ridding the nation of a corrupt ruling class” (Friedman 119). As Friedman argues, “aligning V with Shakespeare” makes the film protagonist look “more like Hamlet” (119), who also avenges his father’s death and readdresses the state of Denmark.

Reinforcing the parallelism with Shakespearean heroes and updating revenge plays, V also equates the function of Yorick’s skull as a relic which Hamlet symbolically addresses, with a shrine devoted to the actress who shared imprisonment and torture with him. As the actress Valerie Page and her lover were killed because they were homosexual, then the

retribution that V seeks appears even as necessary to reconstitute freedom and equality. This way, V becomes a fair avenger with a justified cause, which implies the liberation of the whole country through the extermination of the current fascist government. A government that reached power after causing chaos and extending a lethal virus to proclaim itself as the country's guardian against terrorism.

Underlining the theatrical effect and the identification of V with the heroes of revenge plays, the protagonist of *V for Vendetta* seems to be all time on stage, as he is disguised with a mask, a wig and a pair of gloves, to cover his disfigured body. As his clothes, weapons, manners and speech appear really old-fashioned, and for that reason even more shocking, there is an analogy with old time heroes who fought for true causes with noble aims but also cruel methods.

If the play *Hamlet* explores and plays with the fictive nature of reality, Hamlet himself as a character shows in his procrastination all the contradictions which arise from his disillusioned idealism, so revealing "certain truths about how life imitates literature: how life defers to art" (Urquhart 60). In this sense, there are many points in common between Hamlet and V, as both seem to consciously search for the role of the stage revenger, but also at the same time deferring the fate of it. Urquhart's opinion is that *Hamlet* is "the exceptional example of a revenge tragedy that brings out the genre's self-subversive nature", and so we could argue about *V for Vendetta*. Since disillusionment, procrastination, and subversion are present in both works, in the same way their heroes are also connected by these features. As Urquhart points out, these elements are present in other characters such as Vindice in *The Revenger's Tragedy* by Tourneur, who waits for nine years until accomplishing his vengeance (61), in a similar way as V awaits patiently for years until the moment to carry out his revenge.

And it is precisely the delayed nature of private revenge that provides the dramatic charge to the plot, and its inner conflicts. In the cases of Vindice, Hamlet, and also V this idea of delayed revenge brings them inner conflicts that morally destroy them. As Urquhart explains: "Thus the very idea of the dramatization of revenge lives on the idea of its deferral: if it is carried out at once there is no dramatic conflict. If it is deferred, it has its own inbuilt differences of good and evil" (62). This way, delay is an essential feature in the structure of revenge tragedies, as it provides an element of suspense vital to the melodramatic tone of these works "with larger-than-life villains surrounded by a corrupt

court, with fragile innocent heroines and contrasting libertines”, as Urquhart points out; as they are usually “initiated by the evidence of a ghost or a skull”, so then “the audience is hooked into a world of passion, intrigue and blood” (64), which involves them in the atmosphere of the play.

Another feature of revenge tragedies is the sub-plots developed until fulfilling total vengeance, “providing a supplementary revenge that brings out the essential evil in the nature of the role of stage revenger” (Urquhart 65). This supplementary revenge, developed through the sub-plots, poses serious doubts on the nature of the avenging mission and ultimately over the true intentions of the revenger himself. In fact, the moral ambiguity of the tragic hero causes his final downfall, as he seems doomed to follow his bloody instincts until reaching his wished revenge.

Just as Shakespeare tries to preserve Hamlet’s noble intentions and the fairness of his mission, showing him as part victim through the unfolding of the sub-plots in the play, Moore and Wachowski brothers do it in a similar way firstly in the comic and secondly in the film adaptation. The thematic function of these sub-plots is to expand aspects of a personal revenge over the whole corrupt society, to make some sort of general moral or philosophical point. Thus, expanding the revenger’s private reasons for revenge to the context of social and political significance: “acting as the personification of Vengeance” (Urquhart 68), as in the characters of Hamlet, Vindice, and V. We are puzzled by the contradictory nature of the revenger and his mission, but though causing collateral damages around him, finally he is able to give a general benefit to society too. We do not know well how to feel at the end of revenge tragedies, as Urquhart recognizes (69), and this is quite the same effect experienced at the end of the film *V for Vendetta*.

As Urquhart underlines, “the audience is implicated in the play’s moral ambiguities”, as they enjoy with all the planning and execution developed by the revenger (69). As in *Hamlet*, while the main plot “is regarded as a revenge drama deferred to enable tragedy to emerge, the Laertes/Polonius sub-plot is a perfectly consummated revenge drama illustrating all the games of the genre” (81-82). Similarly, in *V for Vendetta* there are several sub-plots which are unfolding along the story until finally reaching the leader Sutler, as the real responsible of the terror repressive politics. All supplementary plots in this story represent partial chapters of a more general revenge, which keep our attention and make us follow V’s machinations and enjoy with his vengeful actions. These sub-plots

are related to those in posts of power who experimented, abused, tortured, and killed citizens in Larkhill, from where V escaped after destroying it, so giving a justification for the vengeance on them.

According to Urquhart, the supplementary plots in *Hamlet*, related to the deaths of Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, function to generalize Hamlet's discontent, showing him as a disillusioned idealist, and so justifying his acts as suppressing some aspects of the world that are less ideal (70). In this sense, the same interpretation can be applied to *V for Vendetta*, as his main character V commits several crimes which seem hardly justifiable but for his idealist and unconventional nature.

Another important technique in revenge tragedies is the use of disguise, which seeks to suspend the moral ambiguity of the revenger by projecting his guilt upon his other identity, as in the case of Hamlet over the "mad" Hamlet ( Urquhart 72). Also in Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy* the use of disguise underlines Vindice's dual role of private and public revenger, "Vindice-disguised-as-Vengeance" shows the main character "as the avenging hand of God, dramatized in the masque of the *danse macabre*, the dance of death to which all are subject" (Urquhart 73). This reveals many resemblances with V's disguise as Guy Fawkes and his famous smiling mask, and his first presentation as a *dramatis personae*, which makes Evey think he is completely mad because of his appearance, his attitude and his discourse.

But there are more striking connections between these two works too, as we can deduce from Urquhart's study on the revenge tragedy, when he points out Tourneur's ultimate revelation, "the one to which he brings both Vindice and the audience to, by the ironic unveiling of masks and disguises at the end of the play" (73). That is, just almost the same final scene of *V for Vendetta* when the masses of people disguised as V demonstrating in front of the Parliament on the 5<sup>th</sup> November unmask themselves showing their faces, symbolically congregating all those dead or alive who appeared along the film fighting for freedom, so joining them together on the side of V the revenger, but also the hero who brings justice and makes possible political changes by killing the tyrant and blowing up his corrupt system.

The end of *V for Vendetta* keeps all the ingredients of a revenge tragedy and again it shows interesting connections with *Hamlet*. Urquhart remembers how the Prince of Denmark instructs Horatio to tell his story, as V also gives his legacy to Evey; then

“Hamlet is thus finally perceived as a hero fighting against a corrupt world, which up to this point, only he has perceived” (81). This parallels the final impression we get when V dies accomplishing his revenge, as once he fought alone but finally people understand his reasons and support him. Because his struggle is not only seen as a personal *vendetta* but as a public and necessary avengement beyond particular benefits and giving general improvements, as through his final sacrifice he manages to redress the whole status quo of the nation, so freeing the citizenship from the oppressing government.

#### 4. FREEDOM FOREVER

*V for Vendetta* has become an influential contemporary work with a deep social impact, through V's process of identification, assimilation and appropriation of Shakespeare's work. Thus, the playwright is presented as a symbol of rebellion, justifying extreme political activism as the only way of empowering people and changing the establishment. Also thanks to this interaction between *V for Vendetta* and Shakespeare's works, the playwright becomes updated again and more alive than ever, and so his original revolutionary power is reactivated, influencing and inspiring new generations in 21<sup>st</sup> century.

##### 4.1. V's Political Commitment from a Shakespearean Perspective

*Hamlet* could be interpreted as an anti-utopian work, and in this sense Shakespeare's play and Moore's comic, especially with the Wachowskis' film version, share some interesting stylistic features. Both, *Hamlet* and *V*, as discussed above, are committed with a personal revenge, but this aim is also developed together with a higher political mission to liberate the nation of an unfair tyrant. This final result will be only reached through the death of several innocent victims, and the ultimate sacrifice of the avenger. But they also share a common political aim, the will of making the audience think about the possibilities of change.

V's violent actions against government are considered acts of terrorism, but at the same time he is gaining people's favour until they react. The use of violence will cause the death of V and many other innocent victims in the process of liberation. As we have seen, *Hamlet* could be understood as an anti-utopian play, which shares some basic political aspects with dystopian *V for Vendetta*, so resorting to action and justifying violence as necessary to bring deep changes in society. Also both works use a different time to narrate their stories, looking for a setting which could serve to mirror the real institutions of their period, so producing an effective projection of the corrupt society in which they live.

Both works imply that the socio-political conditions can be changed through the intervention of people. They also imply that changes only will be achieved with the direct action of citizenship, which necessarily will include the use of violence. The justification of the use of violence is a recurrent topic along the plot of both works, defended by the



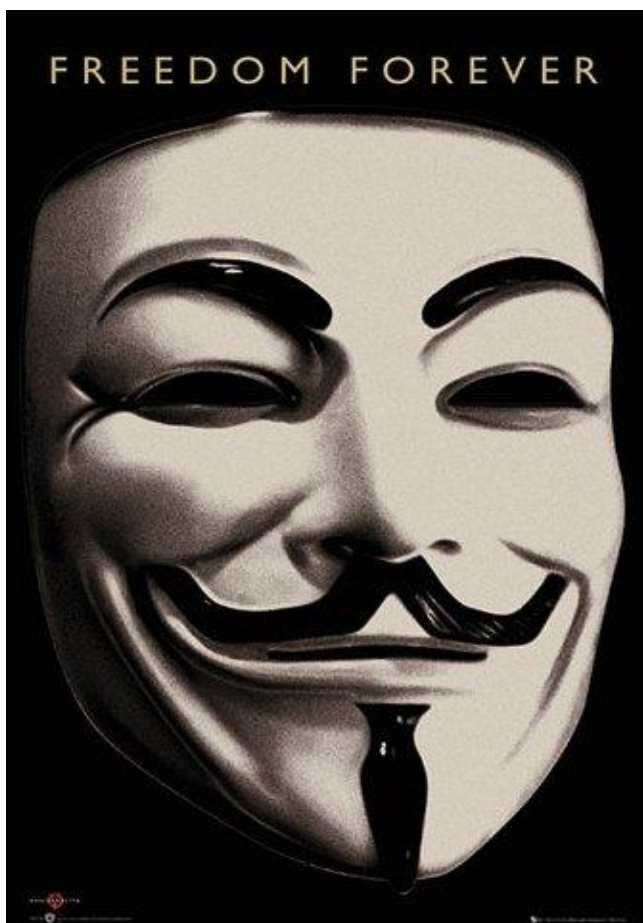
argumentations exposed by their main characters as the only possible useful method to reach their higher objectives.

In the original graphic novel, published under Thatcher's government, it is present the discussion about whether violent actions, done by groups like the IRA, should be considered terrorism or part of the right to struggle for freedom. This issue was retaken by the Wachowskis and McTeigue's film version, going even further in their treatment. According to Friedman, there is a clear parallelism between the Gunpowder plotters at the time of James I abuses over Catholics, and the IRA violent attacks against Thatcher government's discriminatory policy on Catholics in Northern Ireland (131). Friedman concludes that: "*V for Vendetta* ponders the justice of these acts, but it ultimately drafts Shakespeare as a co-conspirator of Guy Fawkes (and, by extension, the IRA) to indicate its support for the use of violence in the crusade for religious freedom" (131). Thus, interestingly, he points out the transformation undergone by this new interpretation of Shakespeare's works.

Although the Wachowskis' film clearly develops the references to the Irish cause from the original graphic novel, it is also true that these allusions are less explicit in the comic than in the film. According to Tony Williams: "*V for Vendetta* is a film explicitly involving protest and revolution (...) it explicitly uses popular culture to attack Bush Regime for its crimes against humanity" (17). Consequently, Williams has a different interpretation from that of Friedman, so establishing clear parallelisms between the Nazi Germany and the American Bush Administration:

*V for Vendetta's* England with its gay-bashing, spin doctoring news manipulation, Guantanamo Bay type concentration camps, and brutal authoritarian control really represents a dystopian version of contemporary America which is now continuing the legacy of Nazi Germany with suspension of civil liberties for suspected "terrorists", illegal confinement, government surveillance in defiance of its Constitution, torture, humiliation, and murder of prisoners aided by the complicity of an apathetic population who are the twenty-first century's equivalent of Hitler's "willing executioners." (Williams 18)

Williams affirms that *V for Vendetta* has received condemnation from the right-wing, but also critics from socialists and anarchist, and even from Alan Moore, "for either not being true to the original graphic novel or failing as a political film" (18); but the film was a success in the box office charts, suggesting that maybe it embodies a response to the feelings and expectations of a wide audience.



Picture 10. The mask with one of V's mottos which has become more popular from the film.

The ultimate cause of V's mission is claimed by different political parts, but we need to see with a wider perspective; as the final cause of freedom and equality, beyond revenge, is the real message of *V for Vendetta*. In fact, V is an idealist who is resolved to action despite all the consequences, as some of his most famous taglines show, such as "FREEDOM FOREVER", or "Ideas are bulletproof". And his fair cause, even pursued by unfair methods, is universal as universal is also the playwright's works used as alibi.

What is really undeniable is the use of Shakespeare's cultural authority to reinforce the position of the hero and justify the use of violence as a means to reach a fair ending. In a wider sense, *V for Vendetta* applies the Shakespearean halo to support illegal methods, which in both the graphic novel and the film does not mean to be unfair. Thus, V parallels the planning and the actions developed by Hamlet in his own revenge, so accomplishing at the same time the liberation of the nation from the unfair ruler.

V's commitment resembles Hamlet's determination to achieve not only personal revenge but also a political change at a higher level. In this sense, their mission has a double purpose and they will only be completely realized if both happen together. Both purposes are tightly connected because when they obtain their complete revenge is precisely through the death of their offender, who is also the unfair ruler of the country. Thus, the completion of their premeditated vengeance brings the liberation of the nation. This way, the freeing of the citizenship brings a fair justification for the violent acts committed by the avenger characters, so elevating them to the status of popular heroes, as after their death they are judged as martyrs who sacrificed themselves to get a superior common benefit, despite all the crimes and collateral victims they have caused in their fight against the system.

Hamlet and V are lonely avengers, with small help by a few characters, and only after their death and the final revelation of all the secrets hidden by power, people will be able to recognize their struggle as legitimate. *Hamlet* and *V for Vendetta* pose the need to resort to direct action and even violence, as the only possible way to change the status quo. Both main characters plan cautiously their acts to achieve their objectives, and also both of them know that the accomplishment of their master plan will imply their own destruction. They know the price they have to pay for revenge, but their commitment is stronger than doubts or love. Both characters defy the authority as they represent the silenced truth, the alternative version of reality which is hidden by the government. Thus, V and Hamlet challenge the establishment by offering people a different vision of facts, telling citizenship the secret sins and crimes which constitute the dark side of power.

The characters of V and Hamlet embody the figure of the tragic lonely hero, dressed distinctively in black, using a witty language in a brilliant discourse, quite often in a monologue to express their thoughts, so clarifying their ideas and giving the chance to the audience to get acquainted with their machinations and inner conflicts. In this sense, Hamlet's behavior and its critical attitude towards power reveal many points in common with the main character of Moore's *V for Vendetta*. In the case of V, he fights against a fascist tyrant regime in a coming future Britain, while *Hamlet* is settled in the corrupted past kingdom of Denmark. But both characters show a total resolution to end the system established by those in power. Also both characters evolve in a time which is fiction but not totally fictitious, because the time and place setting of their stories implies a mirroring of the society of their own time. Thus, Shakespeare could be said to be applying something

similar to an anti-utopian past realm, close in its bleak characterization to the dystopian future depicted in *V for Vendetta*.



Picture 11. Scene from the comic where V is deathly injured but not his ideas, which are bulletproof.

The film version has been widely criticized, but through its visual iconography, it provides mainstream vocabulary of postmodern anarchism (Call 154). Certainly, the film version proves to be more radical than the original comic in several aspects, as for example in the final apotheosis destroying the Parliament, which was secondary in the graphic novel. In the film it becomes an “image of iconoclastic anarchism which recalls the punk values that were central to youth culture until they gave away to patriotic posturing after 9/11” (Call 169). Consequently, more conservative attitudes accompanied by repressive policies justified by the need of self-defense became widespread.

The final act of the film shows the corpse of V in a mortuary shrine surrounded by roses and bombs, travelling in a London tube’s wagon which will blow up the Parliament. At the same time, thousands of citizens disguised as V take the streets, defying the orders of policemen and armed forces. This way, the hero accomplishes both his plans of revenge and rebellion. As Williams argues, V “follows Bakunin’s anarchist philosophy that an act of destruction can also be creative” (19). The crowd remains watching a destructive act, celebrated by a fireworks display, which “challenges them (as well as the audience) to

consider what creative possibilities may follow for any future revolutionary society that must not repeat the mistakes of the past” (Williams 23). Thus, the destruction of the symbol of the previous system represents the beginning for multiple chances to build a fair way of government.



Picture 12. Scene from the original comic, where V praises anarchy quoting Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII*.

Miming again theatre resources, the final scene seems to be in debt with the interactive performance of Stoppard’s *The Fifteen Minute Hamlet*, and The Reduced Shakespeare Company. There is a collective performance, when the crowds occupy the streets disguised as V, so taking part in the ending scene. People show a spontaneous support to the hero, thus making possible the identification of spectators with the demonstrators, and joining symbolically the crowd to follow V’s cause and render him a final homage.

Although critics were divided on the film’s merit, they were unified in their interpretation of its message. According to Brian L. Ott, *V for Vendetta* was an allegory for life in George W. Bush’s America, and a critique of his administration and its policies (40). Ott’s interest in this film lies less in what it says or means, “and more in what the film does and how it does it”. Thus, he argues that “*V for Vendetta* mobilizes viewers at a visceral level to reject political apathy and to enact a democratic politics of resistance and revolt

against any state that would seek to silence dissent” (40). In this sense, the film is able to make people think and react to show their discontent against unfair current situations.

As Dollimore affirms, “the mere thinking of a radical idea is not what makes it subversive: typically it is the context of its articulation: to whom, how many and in what circumstances” (13). Thus, the original creation of a masked avenger by Alan Moore and David Lloyd, directly inspired by the image of Guy Fawkes during Thatcher’s mandate was really challenging. But what is absolutely subversive is the identification of V with the Shakespearean tragic revenge heroes from the Renaissance drama, and even going further the fact of aligning the most reputed playwright with the national traitor, both as the main intellectual supporters of V’s activism.

The operation was really subversive, but only in a limited scale, that of the world of comic, where *V for Vendetta* became a cult graphic novel with an evident political taint. Some decades later, in a completely different context but with some similarities, the Wachowski brothers decided to do a film version of the comic, with a mammoth budget to create a global hit. The supposed connection between Shakespeare and Guy Fawkes is reinforced in the film *V for Vendetta*, when the main character first appears sitting next to a bust of the playwright. This time the context of reference, and also the spur to move the Wachowskis to write their own film version of *V for Vendetta*, was the American Bush Administration which similarly to Thatcher’s government reduced social rights and enhanced security controls. At the time of Thatcher as prime minister, the most dangerous menace and the alibi to apply extraordinary control measures was the IRA; while at the time of Bush as the president of the US, it was radical Muslim terrorism what has started to be a serious threat, as it proved the bombings in London underground, and especially the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York and the attack to the Pentagon.

The ultimate aim of this strange alliance, articulated by *V for Vendetta*, between the national glory William Shakespeare and the national traitor Guy Fawkes, is to convey an unstoppable means to reach people’s consciousness and make them think. But the authentic objective is not only to make citizenship reflect but also react. Having Shakespeare and Fawkes as allies, *V for Vendetta* wants to empower people, compelling them to act and claim for their rights. Especially the film version by the Wachowski brothers and McTeigue is successful in this aspect, putting a mirror in front of people and showing them in the screens who they are and what they can do, because as citizens they

are the true origin of the real power and so they have the authority to put and remove those in government, and especially to ask for changes resorting even to direct action when authorities abuse of their conferred power in any sense.

According to Keller, “*V for Vendetta* evokes, in fragmentary fashion, the history of Western culture and beyond, here suggesting a cyclic chronical or repression and liberation, each replacing the other at regular intervals” (4). In this sense, it seems unavoidable to suffer the politics of oppressive governments until citizenship cannot stand it for longer and revolts against the unfair rulers of the country. This could be considered the cycle of history, but what is obvious is that there is always an intellectual father who creates the ideological bases for the uprising, as there is always a material leader, a man or woman of action who guides the masses in the fight for their rights. In the case of *V for Vendetta*, the intellectual parents seem to be Guy Fawkes giving his image, and especially William Shakespeare rendering his powerful discourse to support the leadership of V as a materialization of the Catholic conspirator’s ideas.

#### 4.2. Shakespeare’s Radical Power Nowadays

Whoever questions the structures of power, defies conventions in society and altogether induces people to act to change that society, can be considered revolutionary. This is the case of William Shakespeare, whose works have served as tools for personal and collective reflection, so leaving an everlasting influence on people’s thoughts and actions. Thus, the radical power of Shakespeare is still in force nowadays as it proves the fact that his reading is making people think while awakening consciousness in 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Moreover, his influence is now more alive than ever, because definitely people have decided to adopt and to assimilate certain plays and sonnets, although often just parts and fragments, which were traditionally restricted to the ambit of what has been called high culture. According to Marjorie Garber: “control over how Shakespeare is adapted, filmed, screened, sung, quoted, tweeted, friended, mashed up, and digitally dispersed often lies elsewhere than in classrooms, books, and academic conferences” (126). Today, Shakespeare not only belongs to the restricted areas of academic studies, but also he has become part of the humankind’s heritage, inhabiting the collective consciousness and so inspiring people in their creations and their performances. In the debate about the

ownership of Shakespeare, his possession has been expanded in the last centuries from scholarly generalists to scholarly specialists, “and now really to the public humanities as well, including the media and popular culture” (Garber 125). Thus, the playwright has been gaining diffusion and popularity, becoming almost globally widespread.

The current impact of the playwright on activism is evident through the recent testimonies which regularly appear on the news. In Garber words:

To cite a term made popular by the Occupy movement, Shakespeare whether produced or read or cited is a kind of human microphone repeated and repeating, voiced and revoiced, always rippling out to new audiences both global and local. (126)

Shakespeare continues to be a constant source of reference and inspiration, able to move and mobilize masses. Garber herself recognizes that “Shakespeare the institution, the idea, the brand, the author and the works can take the lead in trying to bring about much needed changes” (126), related to the understanding of humanities as a necessity rather than a luxury. This is really true especially in these changing times with much confusion and manipulation of information, when the reliability of sources is crucial to have clear ideas and be guided by one’s own critical criteria. In this sense, the constant allusion to Shakespeare’s words to reinforce V’s discourse and acts in *V for Vendetta*, is an example of the use of a more than trustworthy source, a really powerful allied, with enough cultural and historical authority to support V’s cause as the symbolical heir of Guy Fawkes.

Thus, today Shakespeare can be considered as a reliable source in the current post-truth era, where information is systematically manipulated to perpetuate the establishment. This post-truth panorama of digitalized information is part of a time which was already predicted by Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, so describing a coming future when data is controlled and altered by the government using technology to change history. The manipulation of events, facts and important information, creates a state of general ignorance where society is not aware of truth. Furthermore, generating that state of ignorance and blocking the access to a reliable source makes also impossible to compare information, in order to reach different conclusions about the reality shown by those in power.

In fact, the post-truth era is well described in *V for Vendetta* too, especially in the film version, where the manipulation of information through mass media is a usual way of controlling people and making citizenship think exactly what the government wants to.



Consequently, any attempt to give an alternative vision of the institutional truth is considered an act of terrorism, as they contradict the unique acceptable narration of reality, and so it will be fought as a serious menace against the order established. In this sense, it is recurrent that Shakespeare's works serve as an unquestionable cultural guide for dissidents and freedom fighters, not only for fiction characters such as V, but also for real people.

Ewan Fernie argues that "Shakespeare means freedom. That is why the plays matter, and not just aesthetically but also in terms of the impact they historically have had and can continue to have on personal and political life in the world" (1). He claims that freedom is a supreme Shakespearean value, "which has played an important part in the history of culture and which we need to reclaim now" (2). Thus, we can consider that maybe the true essence of the witty playwright is just this revolutionary spark, which is latent in all his work and which is capable of exploding wherever his talent is unbound. In this manner extending that influence not only on fictional works but also on people's lives.

Some well-known works by Shakespeare have served as inspiration for famous popular products, and it is especially relevant the connection between the Bard and dystopian fiction. According to Fernie "Shakespeare's plays crystallize a number of different kinds of freedom dramatically" (2). One of the most important in the Western tradition, is the freedom to be oneself, but also the freedom to do what one likes, the freedom to be different, and also the freedom to enter evil (Ferne 4). All these types of freedom are present in Shakespearean plays such as *Hamlet*, but also in the characters inspired by the Prince of Denmark, as it is the case of V in *V for Vendetta*.

Nowadays, the radical power of Shakespeare's works fits well into the features of products from popular culture, which question current society and criticize the perversion of democratic values in today's political systems. This way, for Booker, dystopian literature has a function of social criticism, as it "constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems" (3). And the Bard's words serve the revolutionary purposes of dystopian fiction, but also the will to compel citizenship to action and the hopeful possibilities to enact a transformation of society are present in *Hamlet* too. These are precisely some of the more clear features which identify the dystopian fiction, because as Gordin explains, "utopias and dystopias by definition seek to alter the social order on a fundamental, systemic level. They address root causes and offer revolutionary solutions" (2), just as Hamlet did in Elsinore, and V did in dystopian London.

Thus, as Fernie affirms, “freedom in Shakespeare is always a struggle for freedom... And it is a struggle that is played out time and again in the life and lives, and progressive political movements, which Shakespeare has stimulated or inspired” (7). Here is where the radical power of Shakespeare resides, in the freedom his characters embody and through the plots his plays develop, which all together form an unstoppable radical force of influence and inspiration for people eager for changes, and so demanding them through action after intellectual reflection.

Dystopias have alerted upon the coming dangers of science and technology used wrongly by tyrants. In *Brave New World* (1932), so named after some Shakespeare’s verses from *The Tempest*, Aldous Huxley depicts what seems to be a perfect world; *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) by Ray Bradbury is also considered one of the most important works related to warning missions of dystopian fiction. Inside this mission, the role which culture and books represent for the fictitious dictatorial regimes is that of a menace. Thus, the reading of classical books is usually considered in dystopian fiction as an act of dissidence with respect to the imposed rules of totalitarian systems.

In the case of the society described in Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, whose title refers to the supposed temperature at which paper burns, the fascist government forbids a long list of books which is compulsory to burn. This has also happened along history in several occasions, as Nazis in Germany under III Reich institutionalized the burning of books and the destruction of artworks which were considered subversive or against the natural established order. But the burning of intellectual creations and also their censorship have been exerted for centuries and they are repressive methods still in force in many countries, as a way of control people’s thoughts which quickly reminds us Orwell’s *1984*.

In this sense, classical books are especially dangerous for fascist governments as they are representatives of a previous way of life when people were able to think freely, and for this reason they are prohibited, because they have the power to make people think and so they can spread again the sin of acting in a different way. Thus, Shakespeare’s works are considered dangerous products by fictional totalitarian regimes, as they are seen as a political threat, as in Huxley’s *Brave New World*, where the playwright symbolizes the art that the World State has rejected and destroyed for considering it the embodiment of real human nature. A true nature that is forbidden just because it represents the emotions and

passions which are repressed by the government, as they defy the emptiness of feelings after the aseptic happiness proclaimed as a general state of mind.

It is worth noticing how books were burnt in bonfires in public places, to avoid contaminating people with their illicit ideas; as the effigies of Guy Fawkes were also set fire to prevent people against treason to government. Both seem to be a way of expiation of their sins and a ritual of purification for common people, who joined and got together in a kind of ceremony of self-affirmation, proclaiming they were part of the purifier squads, because they were in the right side with the authorities and the good citizens; thus, they publically rejected any attempt of questioning the established order, becoming guardians and protectors of their pure and unitary society. Burning has been a quite popular method to exterminate everything, from books to people, which could cause problems to religious and political fanatical institutions, such as the Inquisition or the Nazi Party.

The unitary thought imposed by oppressive governments refuses every way of arising individual beliefs, every form of critical thinking, every means which can provoke subjectivity and, thus through personal criteria, divergence. Difference has no place in fascist systems of domination, as a practical way of avoiding subversive acts. And reading in general, and reading Shakespeare in particular, is considered a subversive act in dystopian fiction works, such as *Brave New World*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and also in *V for Vendetta*, as the volumes which appear in his Shadow Gallery library symbolize.



Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera*, and the old swordsman film *The Count of Monte Cristo* adapted from the original novel by Alexandre Dumas; this way, reinforcing the dramatic halo of the revenge hero. This cultural exchange between artifacts from apparently opposite sides of the social spectrum produces new combinations of already existent elements, with the result of maybe unexpected political effects on nowadays society.



Picture 14. V in the Shadow Gallery emulating *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

Illustrating these effects, as Garber explains, we could see how “a digital activist collective called Anonymous allied itself with the Occupy movement”, and also how “many of the Occupy Wall Street protestors in New York Zuccotti Park wore the Guy Fawkes mask associated with Anonymous” (125). Remember this mask comes from the merchandising launched by Time Warner related to the Wachowski brothers film production *V for Vendetta*. As Garber continues explaining, the Anonymous group describes themselves as activists and they call their activities as activism, “But today we’re dealing with what might be called Shaktivism, the intervention of Shakespeare and Shakespeare studies in the humanities and in intellectual life” (125). Thus, the playwright’s legacy is alive and kicking, updating and regenerating itself to adapt to new times and new circumstances. As there is always some dissident mind ready to cite his words and claim his support for his own cause or for the general one.

On the other hand, as we have seen, *V for Vendetta* is also a catalyst of quite different cultural influences. Notwithstanding, what constitutes really a novelty is the combination of some concrete references, the result of which can be considered a new creation or re-creation, especially taking into account the ultimate purpose behind that selection of cultural elements. In this case, the result is a strategic combination of factors taken from high and low culture, from history and fiction. Remarkably, both the comic and the film version use dystopian genre as their narrative means. A genre charged with political intention and content, while mixing it with the features from Shakespearean plots typical of revenge tragedies. This combination, with a clear dramatic and political intentionality, is what results innovative, as the choice of its different elements and its mixing have not occurred before, and not with the same premeditated intention.

The choice of the dystopian genre as the means to narrate this story by Moore and Lloyd is not casual. As we have seen, dystopias have a deeply political commitment, so they represent the most convenient platform to tell a story like this, with its unconventional characteristics, its critical will, and its revolutionary aims. Both the comic and the film are addressed to a half-convinced public, those who are ready to listen other opinions different from the official one. In the first case, public was restricted to more specialized comic followers and basically circumscribed to UK, and so concentrating its criticism on British government. In the second case, the film version gave a wider visibility to the story as it was a popular American blockbuster at its own time, and later it became a global popular work when it was worldwide broadcast through TV and internet platforms.

The fact of using Shakespearean references is what makes *V for Vendetta* a serious political weapon, beyond geographical frontiers and time circumstances. The popularity of the film adapting Moore's story has been enhanced along the pass of years, starting as a controversial blockbuster, receiving fierce critics because of its violent scenes and radical message; but also conquering the status of cult work, expanding its influence through TV and digital media. People adopted its revolutionary content and V's activism, so taking his ideology into practice, bringing his mask to the streets. For the first time, the TV news reported images which seemed to reproduce some scenes from McTeigue's film, showing thousands of people wearing Guy Fawkes masks while marching and demonstrating against political or economic institutions.

Shakespeare's universality is transferred to V's cause, thus the film becomes a global political platform to expand activism. Applying a concrete narrative structure and a plot development clearly in debt with revenge tragedies, a particular *dramatis personae* characterization inspired by Elizabethan dramatic heroes such as Hamlet, and the prolific use of quotations from Shakespeare's works, all confers to *V for Vendetta* the necessary features to transcend time and space. Mirroring the radical power of Shakespeare, the film version becomes a cultural reference able to fuel consciousness around the planet, to adapt to different social contexts, and to serve to almost any kind of fair struggle against oppression or abuse of any type.

#### 4.3. Fiction Comes True: Rebellion Is Here

Illustrator David Lloyd was the first who had the idea of using the image of the conspirator Guy Fawkes as the identity for V, when working on a political comic against Thatcher's policy. Then Alan Moore wrote the script developing the idea as a kind of historical revision of the Gunpowder Conspiracy four hundred years later, celebrating his attempt to blow the Parliament as a symbol of tyranny, and finish religious persecution of Catholics. Some decades later, the Wachowski brothers adapted the graphic novel, changing and adding some elements, but keeping the original revolutionary spirit of Moore's comic. They transformed the idea of blowing the Houses of Parliament, from an explosive initial declaration of intentions of V in the original comic, to a crucial ending in the film version. Thus, the blowing up of Parliament on 5<sup>th</sup> of November was conceived as a symbolical final apotheosis, which involved the participation of the citizenship in its successful performance.



Picture 15. People marching towards the Parliament in the last scene of the Wachowski brothers film.

This final scene is considered by many critics as one of the most revolutionary images which have ever been shown in a mainstream film production. The fact of procrastinating the destruction of the Parliament enhances its powerful visual effect and its political meaning, so contributing to impact deeply on audiences that could feel involved in the story as part of the mobilized masses, as it ultimately happened in real life. The image of thousands of unarmed demonstrators wearing Guy Fawkes masks, while marching towards the army which protects the Parliament, shows a symbolical image of collective identification and anonymity that has become very appealing to protest groups such as Anonymous among many others.





Picture 16. In the original comic V blows up the Parliament at the beginning of the story.

In the film *V for Vendetta* there are real images taken from TV news which show riots, demonstrations, and police charges; this way, the director resorts to documentary scenes to give credibility to the story. But curiously, some years after the film release people resort to the film fiction to give entity to their claims and vindications. Nowadays we can see demonstrators in the streets wearing Guy Fawkes masks, popularized through the film version of Moore's comic. The masks have been appearing worldwide in any act of social and political reclaim of citizenship rights, from US to Egypt, from Spain to UK or Turkey.

In an interview for *BBC*, David Lloyd, the creator of the original image of the mask for the comic series, "compares its use by protesters to the way Alberto Korda's famous photograph of Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara became a fashionable symbol for young people across the world" (Waites). From this affirmation, we could conclude that V has equally been transformed by popular acclaim into a global icon of revolutionary activism for the new millennium, so replacing other older revolutionary images from the past 20<sup>th</sup> century. And in another interview given for *The Guardian* in 2011, Alan Moore,

the writer of the original comic, seemed quite pleased that his creation has become such a prominent emblem of modern activism:

I suppose when I was writing *V for Vendetta* I would in my secret heart of hearts have thought: wouldn't it be great if these ideas actually made an impact? So when you start to see that idle fantasy intrude on the regular world... It's peculiar. It feels like a character I created 30 years ago has somehow escaped the realm of fiction. (Lamont)

It is a fact that the presence of Guy Fawkes sarcastic smile has multiplied since the première of the film adaptation of Moore's comic. Thousands of demonstrators have been wearing his mask around the world in Occupy sit-ins, demonstrations against G20 and G8, and all kind of anti-government actions. As Moore declares in an interview about the impact of his story and the influence of his character V, he sees the use of Guy Fawkes masks nowadays as a symbolical act of protest, which gives the protection of anonymity and a powerful corporate image to protesters with the same appearance. Thus, he refers to the mask in these terms: "I tried to use the cryptic nature of it to dramatic effect... And when you've got a sea of V masks, I suppose it makes the protesters appear to be almost a single organism" (Lamont). The creator of the mask, illustrator Lloyd also has recognized in an interview for *BBC News* he visited the Occupy Wall Street protest in Zuccotti Park, New York, to have a look at some of the people wearing his mask. He says: "Anonymous needed an all-purpose image to hide their identity and also symbolize that they stand for individualism - V for Vendetta is a story about one person against the system" (Waites). Thus, the mask of V gives symbolical power to people, keeping their individual identity while creating a compact mass of protesters.

It seems as if both authors were secretly hoping to have this current social impact through their creation, especially if we pay attention to some of V's most empowering sentences, which have appeared repeatedly in the parcels of demonstrators as much as in the film's merchandising, such as the popular slogan: "People shouldn't be afraid of their governments. Government should be afraid of their people". But there is another interesting aspect associated to the use of V's mask, as Moore remarks: "It turns protests into performances. The mask is very operatic; it creates a sense of romance and drama", and then "people look like they're having a good time. And that sends out a tremendous message" (Lamont). Consequently, this also involves the novelty of performance and entertainment for those taking part on activist actions.

In this sense, reflecting about the causes why the idea of V has rooted on collective consciousness in the context of contemporary protests, Moore “sees parallels between the dystopia predicted in the story and the world today”. Thus, he remarks “a strand of the plot that seemed to anticipate the sort of internet-based dissent that has made groups such as Anonymous and Assange’s WikiLeaks such major agents of protest”. That is, in *V for Vendetta* V’s success is based on the fact that the state relies upon a centralized computer network which he has been able to hack (Lamont); as actually it has happened with hackers nowadays.

Anonymous was the first organized protest group which has used V’s mask as a corporate image. The group originated in 2003 and it became well known in 2008 through a series of actions against the Church of Scientology. During the campaign launched by Anonymous, they uploaded the first of a series of videos on YouTube in which a masked person read a speech on behalf of the organization, which attracted hundreds of thousands of viewers. That release and the subsequent ones seem to follow the aesthetic of V’s speech interrupting public TV broadcast to send his own message to the nation. Thus, creating a symbolical connection between the fiction character and the hacktivist organization. Besides, with the mask they incorporate a theatrical element which adds a dramatic twist to their cause. Consequently, they understand protest as a performance, including for the first time popular culture references as a political weapon in the new millennium struggle.



Picture 17. V interrupting TV broadcast to send his own message to the nation.

During the protests against the Church of Scientology, thousands of Anonymous followers joined around the world simultaneously and coordinately. And that was the first public event where many of the protesters wore the Guy Fawkes masks popularized by the graphic novel and film *V for Vendetta*, so becoming a popular symbol for Anonymous. The organization has developed hacktivism and direct action protests around the world since then. In fact, it was an early supporter of the WikiLeaks, the Occupy movement, and the Arab Spring.

Anonymous describes itself as an international Internet gathering with a loose network of activist and hacktivist entities that follow some general common ideas. The group, could be better described as a movement, without a clear leadership and with an open membership to anyone who wants to be part of the collective. As it is shown in its web page, the group uses a quite dramatic motto in the style of V's eloquence: "We are Anonymous. We are Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us."

The group became known for a series of well-publicized attacks on governments, religious organizations, and corporate websites, which were accused of corruption, unfair practices, and censorship. As a consequence, some activists have been arrested for involvement in Anonymous cyber attacks in different countries, as governments are highly critic and see them as a serious menace, calling them as "cyber terrorists", while sympathizers see them as "freedom fighters". This is also a dichotomy quite similar to that of V as a controversial character, a man who pursues his aims beyond the restrictions of law and despite all the consequences.

From Anonymous appropriation of Guy Fawkes mask, it has appeared around the world in all kind of public protests. It is estimated that more than 100,000 masks are sold every year, according to the manufacturers (Waite). In fact, it is quite ironic that V's masks have become a lucrative business for Time Warner, the media company that owns the rights to Moore's creation, and which produced the film version too. This way, anti-system demonstrators are using the masks while increasing the multinational profits, but it is also true that the Warner corporation is taking profit from those anti-system movements.

Possibly the most striking event related to masked demonstrators in connection to the popular mythology which has been spontaneously generated from the comic publishing, and especially from the film release, is the so called Million Mask March. Anonymous

group has organized worldwide gatherings to commemorate Guy Fawkes Night since 2011, but on 5 November 2013 demonstrations became global as they were held in 400 cities around the world, with the most important events happening in London and Washington DC, but there were also events across the planet, usually outside of government buildings (Quinn). In 2015, protests multiplied and widespread over more than 600 cities according to news reports keeping London as its epicentre, and so the march has become a defiant phenomenon for authorities and policemen (Gayle). It has proved to be a fast growing movement which has caught people sympathies, so making true the final scene of the film *V for Vendetta*, where a crowd of citizens join and march in the streets towards the Parliament.

Thus, the concept of protest as a performance is a fact nowadays, as the Million Mask March has become institutionalized as an annual protest occurring symbolically on 5th of November, celebrating Guy Fawkes Night, but also rendering tribute to the fiction character popularized in *V for Vendetta*. The worldwide protest is associated with Anonymous movement and the reasons to organize it include several of its recurrent topics, such as corruption in politics, demilitarization, restrictions to freedom, and police violence. The marches are coordinated basically through social media and allow citizenship to participate in this kind of political performance, wearing Guy Fawkes masks while protesting to create the necessary changes in current society from its basis.

The mask itself has transformed into a symbol of resistance and protest, related to subversive groups which defend illegal methods to reach their higher purposes, in the style of Shakespearean-like revenge heroes such as V. In this sense, recently there has been a visual self reference used by the Wachowski brothers in the Netflix series *Sense8*, where there is a scene with an Anonymous-like masked character.

On the other hand, it seems that the use of V's masks and its vindications in a performance style have paved the way for other recent protests in US, also emulating the characters and the scenes from another well-known dystopian novel adapted to TV series, *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood (1985). The press has shown images taken from demonstrations organized by feminist groups protesting against Trump's public sexist attitude towards women. Feminist activists performed political protests while reproducing the paraphernalia associated to Atwood's story, where a long queue of silent women in red were marching around public institutions, while wearing the typical habit which

symbolizes the sexual reproductive function given to them in the novel. Thus, *V for Vendetta* has become an starting point for all kind of innovative protests which involve performance in their protocol, incorporating the principles which have already been put into practice by the social and political movements influenced by V's story.

This is a quite appealing field for research, the study of the relationship between the mutually influential ambits of fiction and reality, how they interact to each other, and the effects they cause. Thus, reality affects fiction, but fiction also intervenes into reality. As we have already mentioned in this study, the play *Hamlet* explores and plays with the fictive nature of reality, so revealing "certain truths about how life imitates literature: how life defers to art" (Urquhart 60). But this is also present in other recent cultural products which take advantage of Shakespeare's works, instilling his powerful creative energy and his intellectual depth into their stories. An influential contemporary product such as *V for Vendetta*, which was firstly inspired by the historical character of Guy Fawkes, has been gaining the profits from Shakespeare's legacy. But otherwise, *V for Vendetta* has also trespassed the borders of fiction to come true, acting over different aspects of reality and contributing to transform it.

## 5.CONCLUSION

In the process of popularizing Shakespeare's works, multiple versions of all kind have made possible that the Bard's spirit updated and came to life again. Through several ways of adaptation and appropriation, his plays continue influencing authors and creating a plethora of cultural products with different aims and purposes.

The use of ideological or political intentions in appropriating Shakespeare's words have increased since the ending of the last century, making necessary to revise how the playwright is applied to these new contexts. *V for Vendetta* is a successful postmodernist example of this type of ideological revision of Shakespearean legacy, applying quotation, citation, *bricolage*, and pastiche, as methods of appropriation; while using the features of dystopian genre mixed with the typical dramatic elements and the structure of revenge tragedies as the means to narrate the story in a more effective way, thus becoming an influential contemporary work with a deep social impact.

And through this cultural symbiosis both benefit, as Shakespeare updates and becomes contemporary once more, while *V for Vendetta* reinforces its arguments by reclaiming the Shakespearean legacy. Each Shakespeare's play is as important as a whole as it is in each of its parts or fragments, because each act, scene, monologue or verse, contains and represents the true essence of its author. Shakespeare's style is present in every line and word of his widespread works, and by the simple act of reciting a sonnet or quoting a character's part, the magic of quick associations evokes, to those who already know these references, the complete content and meaning of the original.

Through V's process of identification and appropriation of Shakespeare's words, the playwright is presented as a supporter of rebellion, allied of the revolution. Thus, the dramatist's words, image, and prestige, are used by the masked avenger to justify extreme political activism as the only way of empowering people and changing the establishment. The authority of the playwright and poet is transferred to the activist as a kind of legacy which confers a justification for his acts. As in all revenge tragedies, the tragic hero must die to pay for his crimes, but in this case, beyond revenge, V has a liberating mission to be continued.

Thus, *V for Vendetta* has left a perennial political message still in force, because his ultimate aims are the fight for the universal rights of freedom and equality, which are valid

from Thatcher's era to Brexit times, from Bush administration to Trump outbreak. And in the process to reach his true aims, V mobilizes people to recover their power, by invoking another universal reference as his alibi: Shakespeare and his works.

The intellectual links established between Guy Fawkes and William Shakespeare through *V for Vendetta*, make them revolutionary allies in modern 21<sup>st</sup> century activism; thus, both update and transform into powerful references for the new protest movements. Their combined cultural strength is wisely used by Moore and the Wachowki brothers to give support to V, so reinforcing his struggle against the totalitarian government. Definitely, V's success is as much in debt to Fawkes as it is to Shakespeare; as both have contributed to build up the revenger character, the first giving his own image and the second rendering his discourse. Thanks to these allies, V has reached his current status as a popular icon in nowadays society, and as a symbol of rebellion in the new millennium activism.

Thus, the story, the message, and the image of V have inspired many people to get conscious of their own situation and act in all kind of actions of protest around the world. Fiction finally came true, and the revolutionary acts, described in the original comic and especially shown in the film, have been replicated in the streets by thousands of demonstrators, a mass of masked V's descendants claiming for their rights, convinced to have the power to reverse what they consider unfair, with the smile of Fawkes painted in their faces and the words of Shakespeare resonating in their minds.



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