



*Introduction*

## **Shakespeare and the Modern Novel**

*Graham Holderness*

---

When I first studied the novel, the form was believed to have originated in the eighteenth century with the fiction of Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson, and was synonymous with literary realism. The novel emerged from the Age of Reason, was closely associated with journalism, satire and conduct literature, and marked a profound break with the supernatural, fantastic and romance narratives of the past. Its perfect embodiment was to be found in the work of Jane Austen, even today an immensely popular writer, and widely regarded as a defining practitioner of the novel form. This kind of novel was/is in every respect different from Shakespeare: new, 'novel', not old; prose, not poetry; narrative, not dramatic; realist, not magical; fictional, not metafictional; and could deal with Shakespeare only as an objective feature of the society and culture being represented.

This restrictive view of the novel, invented by literary historians and critics, is still to be found in the reviewing practices of the quality press, and in the shortlists of prestigious literary prizes. But there is a huge gap between this highbrow conception of the novel, as a kind of ethically-informed, social and psychological realism, and the

Shakespeare and the Modern Novel

Edited by Graham Holderness

<https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/HoldernessModernNovel>

Not for resale

actual practice and popularity of the form. A list of the best-selling novels of all time published in the *Guardian* was easily dominated by thrillers, magic, erotica and the Gothic: by Dan Brown, J. K. Rowling, E. L. James and Stephanie Meyer. The novel encompasses both literary and popular fiction, and as such flourishes in a myriad of different genres: adventure, crime, romance, history, supernatural, Gothic, enchantment, utopian, dystopic, pornographic and so on. In addition, its form allows for the widest possible range of artistic experimentation, and for creative engagement with other media such as film, visual art and digital technologies.

This diversity and flexibility of the novel form suggests that the notion of its history as coterminous with modernity is simply false, since long narratives of fantasy, romance and historical fiction go back some two thousand years, and flourished in the classical, medieval and early-modern worlds. The term ‘novel’ derives from the Italian *novella*, a form of short story popular in the Renaissance, and which provided the plots for most of Shakespeare’s comedies, and some tragedies. If the fictional prose narratives of Boccaccio, Bandello and Cinthio were ‘novels’, then the first link between Shakespeare and the novel is that many of his plays were initially derivative of the form. The novel is already inside Shakespeare, before we start to consider his subsequent impact on what we now know as the novel.

Shakespeare was able to incorporate plots, characters and themes from Italian novellas because the form of drama he practised was as diverse and varied as is our contemporary popular fiction, and his plays thrived on the imaginative plenitude and aesthetic flexibility of romance, adventure, enchantment, verbal extravagance and metafiction. The early practitioners of what we may call the ‘modern novel’ in the eighteenth century, basing their stories in the reality of contemporary life, could not adapt Shakespeare’s works in the way that Shakespeare appropriated the Italian novel.

In our own twenty-first century, the Shakespearean novel is undergoing a Renaissance. The long prose narrative has been energised by interfaces with different media, especially TV, film and the internet. New methods of publishing and consuming literature have transformed the nature of readership into an interactive participation. The postmodern collapsing of generic restrictions has enabled Shakespeare to migrate much more comprehensively across previously sealed boundaries, into popular genres such as crime fiction,

paranormal romance, dystopian fable and supernatural fantasy. In contemporary fiction, Shakespeare himself is as likely to be found killing zombies or vampires as writing poems and plays. Major fiction writers have based whole novels on Shakespeare plays. *Lunar Park* (2005) by American Brett Easton Ellis, *101 Reykjavik* (1996, trans. 2002) by Icelander Hallgrímur Helgason, and *Something Rotten* (2004) by British author Jasper Fforde are all direct and explicit reworkings of *Hamlet*. In a landmark publishing initiative currently in progress, the Hogarth Press has commissioned a pantheon of top fiction authors to write novels based on specific Shakespeare plays, some of them discussed in this issue. This powerful and cosmopolitan team of authors, whose work encompasses a wide range of fictional styles, will undoubtedly consolidate the status of the Shakespearean novel as a global phenomenon for the twenty-first century. Fiction writers now can imitate and adapt Shakespeare's plays as easily as he was able to adapt the novel into drama. Over four centuries, Shakespeare's plays have undergone some remarkable transformations, but none so striking as the gradual evolution of the novel form to a point where Shakespeare, poet and playwright of yesterday, could be so readily and successfully incorporated into the fiction of today.

This book provides space for a number of distinguished Shakespeare critics to reflect on the interactions between Shakespeare and the modern novel. Charles Conaway discusses Emily St. John Mandel's 2014 novel, *Station Eleven*, set in a world without electricity, motorised transportation, modern technology and abundant resources, and focused on a small troupe of actors and musicians who perform concerts and stage Shakespeare's plays in the scattered communities of survivors of an influenza pandemic. The novel dramatises a constant struggle for survival, and probes, from a variety of perspectives, the notion that Beethoven and Shakespeare can enrich our lives in post-apocalyptic times. Elena Bandín and Elisa González analyse Ian McEwan's *Nutshell*, published in September 2016 on the occasion of the fourth centenary of Shakespeare's death, as a modern rewriting of *Hamlet*. The novel attempts to fill an important gap that Shakespeare left unclear and unexplained and that is integral in reconfiguring the meaning of the play: the love triangle of Gertrude, Claudius and King Hamlet. Natalie Eschenbaum considers how Anne Tyler's novel *Vinegar Girl* (Hogarth Press, 2016) adopts and adapts the critical debate concerning misogyny in Shake-

Shakespeare and the Modern Novel

Edited by Graham Holderness

<https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/HoldernessModernNovel>

Not for resale

speare's *Taming of the Shrew*. She considers Tyler's purposeful use of the powerful term 'girl' to show how the taming plot is modernised, but remains misogynistic. *Vinegar Girl* reveals how *any* tale about taming a woman has an underlying message of male dominance. Keith Jones also considers Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* together with Gary Schmidt's *Wednesday Wars* as test cases to explore generic considerations in modern novels that employ Shakespeare, but do not retell or recast the plot of any particular work by Shakespeare. Questions to be considered include how the works employ the Shakespearean genres of comedy, tragedy, history, romance and tragicomedy to create their own genres – and, conceivably, to transcend them.

Laurie Osborne shows how the *Hogarth Shakespeare* novels bring into focus several features emerging in the encounter between Shakespeare and fiction writing, and so both contributes to, and emphasises, Shakespeare's participation in the three zones of cultural capital: our individual and collective artistic investment in series, culturally provoked shifts in adaptive choice, and evolving genres that increasingly test former lines between literary and genre fiction. Elizabeth Rivlin also focuses on Anne Tyler's *Vinegar Girl* to explore how both the novel and the Hogarth series seek to create affective 'middlebrow' communities that purport to keep Shakespeare alive through love. This analysis helps to clarify the nature of the Hogarth Shakespeare Project as a middlebrow publishing enterprise, not in any pejorative sense, but in the sense that it uses Shakespeare to cultivate large, expansive communities built on the relationship between the adapting author and her readers. Katherine Scheil shows how the Dark Lady of the Sonnets has become a central figure in millennial novels by women writers, designed primarily for a female reading audience. Meredith Whitford's *Shakespeare's Will* (2010), Alexa Schnee's *Shakespeare's Lady* (2012), Victoria Lamb's *His Dark Lady* (2013), Grace Tiffany's *Paint: A Novel of Shakespeare's Dark Lady* (2013), Sally O'Reilly's *Dark Aemelia* (2014), Andrea Chapin's *The Tutor* (2015) and Mary Sharratt's *The Dark Lady's Mask* (2016) all explore the possible identity and role of a Dark Lady in Shakespeare's artistic and (often intimate) personal life. This article considers what's at stake by placing this imaginary woman at the heart of Shakespeare's artistic inspiration, and what this tells us about the meaning(s) of 'Shakespeare' for contemporary women writers and readers. Kate Myers examines Shakespeare's influence

Shakespeare and the Modern Novel

Edited by Graham Holderness

<https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/HoldernessModernNovel>

Not for resale

on Angela Carter's earlier novel *Nights at the Circus*, which like *Wise Children* builds a bricolage of Shakespearean allusions, but more subtly reconsiders the ontological issues of legitimacy by returning to Shakespeare's interest in ambiguity, in deniability, in time, and in space. Carter, she argues, reverses time and dismembers space to criticise the masculine-made-legitimate at the expense of the feminine, which Shakespeare's temporal and spatial manipulations ultimately uphold.

Tareq Zuhair explores how displacement in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is tacitly approached, and how this reaction has become a recurrent case in Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923) and Laila Al Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). Freudian neurosis, despite being a psychological disorder rather than a literary topic, has been used in literature to conceptualise characters' suffering. Freud contends that the suppression of desires due to hidden and unhidden causes leads to neurosis. Being unable to succeed in life, individuals feel neurotic and tend to displace their frustrations onto other persons or objects. This chapter analyses the incentives of neurosis in each work, how these reasons lead to the onset of displacement and how literary works share relatively similar implications about displacement despite being about different issues.

Finally Yousef Abu Amreih shows how Palestinian-American novelist Susan Abulhawa appropriates in her novel *The Blue between Sky and Water* (2015) some of the themes, tropes and motifs that Shakespeare employs in *Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1596) in order to depict how wars and conflicts turn Palestinian people's love stories/marriages into tragedies. In particular, love at first sight, the (negative) impact of families on love stories, exile and banishment, the use of herbs and traditional medicine, humour and parties that practically turn ominous and fateful are among the themes, tropes and motifs that both Shakespeare and Abulhawa employ to represent love stories and marriages that are embroiled in ongoing violent events. Overall, in its depiction of 'love and violence', Abulhawa's novel appropriates Shakespeare's greatest love tragedy and throws light on some of the conditions under which Palestinians live in Gaza.