

Xavier University

Exhibit

Faculty Scholarship

English

2023

Introduction: Shakespeare and Contemporary Fiction

Graley Herren
Xavier University

Niamh J. O'Leary
Xavier University - Cincinnati

Follow this and additional works at: https://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/english_faculty



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Herren, Graley and O'Leary, Niamh J., "Introduction: Shakespeare and Contemporary Fiction" (2023).
Faculty Scholarship. 620.
https://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/english_faculty/620

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Exhibit. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Exhibit. For more information, please contact exhibit@xavier.edu.



PROJECT MUSE®

Introduction: Shakespeare and Contemporary Fiction

Graley Herren, Niamh J. O'Leary

Comparative Drama, Volume 57, Number 1-2, Summer & Fall 2023, pp. 1-7 (Article)

Published by Western Michigan University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2023.a904529>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/904529>

🔗 *For content related to this article*

https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=article&id=904529

COMPARATIVE *drama*

VOLUME 57 • NO. 1-2 • SUMMER & FALL 2023

Introduction: Shakespeare and Contemporary Fiction

GRALEY HERREN AND NIAMH J. O'LEARY

“Every age creates its own Shakespeare,” asserts Marjorie Garber at the beginning of *Shakespeare After All*. “What is often described as the timelessness of Shakespeare, the transcendent qualities for which his plays have been praised around the world and across the centuries, is perhaps better understood as an uncanny timeliness, a capacity to speak directly to circumstances the playwright could not have anticipated or foreseen.”¹ Shakespeare certainly still speaks to spectators, readers, and writers in the 21st century—but we also talk back. This special issue on “Shakespeare and Contemporary Fiction” for *Comparative Drama* contributes to a larger ongoing discourse of “talking back to Shakespeare.”

The first book to use this term explicitly appears to have been Martha Tuck Rozett’s *Talking Back to Shakespeare* (1994). Rozett notes that this practice stemmed from her experiences teaching undergraduate Shakespeare courses. When she started to encounter more and more

resistance from her students who questioned the values, assumptions, and biases they found in the plays, Rozett began devising assignments where students produced “transformations” of Shakespeare in response. She had long noted how theatre practitioners effectively offered such transformations through creative stage adaptations. But she became increasingly interested in the diverse array of Shakespearean transformations from contemporary creative writers. “As I continued to teach and write about Shakespeare,” Rozett reflected,

I began to see a kinship, a kind of temperamental and critical affinity, between the talking back that occurred in the classroom and the published transformations I was reading. When writers transform Shakespeare’s plays, they challenge the author’s perceived intent, or perhaps more precisely, the cultural and critical baggage the text has acquired over time. They talk back to the cultural authority that has been invested in the plays, even as they appropriate that cultural authority as the originating premise for a new imaginative construct.²

Jo Eldridge Carney further elaborates upon this transformative dialectical process in her recent book *Women Talk Back to Shakespeare* (2022). “Talking back,” according to Carney, “typically implies a rebuke to an authoritative position, but it can also be a less accusatory impulse to continue a conversation.” The works she examines “are not all unmitigated critiques of Shakespeare’s plays but they do insist on reexamination of their aesthetic and ideological terms, and they invite a dialogue in which women and Shakespeare can talk back—and forth—with each other.”³

The critics and novelists included in this special issue share the approach articulated so well by Rozett and Carney. The following articles all focus upon a contemporary novel (published within the past fifteen years), which significantly adapts or reinvents a play by Shakespeare. These critical and creative works engage with Shakespeare’s drama, neither to praise the bard nor to bury him, but to talk back and forth in a meaningful and mutually enriching dialogue. The articles are perfectly capable of speaking for themselves, but here is a brief preview of what you can look forward to reading in “Shakespeare and Contemporary Fiction.”

In the opening article, Amy Muse argues that Maggie O’Farrell’s 2020 historical novel *Hamnet: A Novel of the Plague* doubles effectively

as “creative criticism.” The term was coined in 1910 by J. E. Spingarn, but it has enjoyed a resurgence in the 21st century. Muse cites as illustrations the exemplary two volumes (2009 and 2013) of *The Story about the Story: Great Writers Explore Great Literature*, edited by J. C. Hallman. These collections feature writing about literature from celebrated authors like Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf, Cynthia Ozick, and Salman Rushdie. There is a larger lesson to be learned from such writing, namely that, as Graham Holderness puts it in *Tales from Shakespeare: Creative Collisions*, “the best criticism is actually creative writing.”⁴ Creative criticism is an emerging force in Shakespeare Studies as well, witnessed, for instance, in the 2016 special issue on “Creative Critical Shakespeares” for *Critical Survey*. Muse makes a persuasive case for O’Farrell’s *Hamnet* as the consummate realization of this aesthetic. The novel is not only a captivating work of fiction in its own right, defamiliarizing and reimagining the family life of William Shakespeare and Agnes (aka Anne) Hathaway, but also a groundbreaking work of creative criticism, teaching us how to see *Hamlet* through new eyes and staging a fresh encounter with Shakespeare’s most famous play. Muse’s own essay is an ideal expression of creative criticism and the best kind of writing about both Shakespeare and contemporary fiction. As such, “Longing to Stay Tied: Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet* as a Work of Creative Criticism” opens this special issue with great strength.

Shakespeare has long been closely identified with white Anglo cultural hegemony. But Vanessa I. Corredera provides an insightful case study in how Shakespearean adaptation can serve to advance anticolonial and antiracist values, in effect talking back to Shakespeare and writing back against the British empire. She concentrates on Chloe Gong’s YA novel *These Violent Delights*, a creative adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. Set in the colonial context of 1920s Shanghai, *These Violent Delights* chronicles the blood feud between Juliette Cai of the Chinese Scarlet Gang and Roma Montagov of the Russian White Flowers. Corredera characterizes Gong’s novel as “edutainment.” Gong writes an accessible story that succeeds in entertaining her target audience of 13–18-year-old readers. However, as Corredera perceptively demonstrates, Gong also educates YA readers about key postcolonial concepts, presenting models for resisting imperialist ideology and colonialist exploitation. In “Decommissioning the Bard: Chloe Gong’s *These Violent Delights* as Anticolonial Edutainment,”

Corredera also provides pedagogical inspiration for *Comparative Drama* readers who are educators. If you are designing a unit on Shakespeare and want to put his work in dialogue with contemporary discourses on race and colonial power dynamics, then Gong's YA novel and Corredera's groundbreaking article may be exactly what you're looking for.

In his 2008 novel *let me tell you*, Paul Griffiths challenges himself to talk back to Shakespeare in the playwright's own language—quite literally. The entire novel is written in first-person from the perspective of Ophelia, and the novelist confines himself to using only the 483 words spoken by the character during the play *Hamlet* (plus occasional homonyms of those words). Hannibal Hamlin draws overdue attention to this bravura achievement in his article “Paul Griffiths's *let me tell you*, *Hamlet*, and the Intertextual Mode of Literary Adaptation.” Hamlin argues that the formal constraints Griffiths assumes as a writer effectively mirror the social, familial, and gender constraints placed upon Ophelia, known as “O” in *let me tell you*. The novel dramatizes O's efforts to resist these constraints and exert autonomy while remaining bound by the language of her original oppression. Griffiths reinforces this theme through numerous allusions to other literary works similarly preoccupied with confinement: social, sexual, metaphysical, and metatheatrical. Hamlin astutely recognizes and reconstructs intertextual conversations between Griffiths's *let me tell you* and Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The result is a “palimpsestuous” adaptation that deserves continued consideration from Shakespeare scholars. Hamlin's article provides an excellent jumping-off point for that critical conversation.

The final four articles in this issue focus on contemporary novels inspired by Shakespeare's late romances. The first is Rebekah Bale's cogent “‘The world to me is but a ceaseless storm’: *Pericles*, *The Porpoise*, and the Resistance of Exile.” After an initial zenith of popularity in the 17th century, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, co-written by Shakespeare and George Wilkins, languished in relative obscurity for over two centuries. However, as Bale notes, in recent years *Pericles* has been “having a moment,” enjoying high-profile productions and a remarkable novelistic reinterpretation, *The Porpoise* by Mark Haddon. Bale offers multiple theories as to why *Pericles*

is ringing once again with contemporary relevance. For one, she argues, the storytelling powers of Marina in *Pericles* and Angelica in *The Porpoise* resonate powerfully with #MeToo testimonies. She likewise analyzes Haddon's comeuppance for the despicable George Wilkins character as, in her words, "a satisfyingly unpleasant punishment in the style of a modern day #MeToo reckoning." Bale also argues that the exile theme in *Pericles* speaks to our era's multiple migrant crises across the globe. Rereading *Pericles* through the lens of *The Porpoise* reveals additional dimensions to exile, including linguistic exile. Bale is particularly interested in the idea of voluntary exile as a form of resistance to entrenched authority figures and power structures.

No examination of Shakespeare and fiction would be complete without attention to the landmark Hogarth Shakespeare project, which published seven novels by major contemporary writers, each adapting a Shakespeare play. In her article, Niamh J. O'Leary examines Jeanette Winterson's 2015 *The Gap of Time: The Winter's Tale Retold*, the inaugural novel of the series. Attending to both Winterson's adaptive choices as she alters Shakespeare's late romance to a work of magical realism and to her literary innovations, in "Queering *The Winter's Tale* in Jeanette Winterson's *The Gap of Time*," O'Leary demonstrates how Winterson speaks into the gaps and absences in Shakespeare's text. O'Leary argues that Winterson queers the play not only through an explicit engagement with homoeroticism in her retelling, but also through queering narrative form. The latter is O'Leary's major addition to the conversation about the novel, as it reads the novel as a metanarrative about adaptation itself. Winterson, O'Leary claims, constructs this metanarrative through the language of creativity, casting her novel as a "Cover Version" of Shakespeare's play while peopling it with characters who embrace or resist anxieties about originality.

The final two articles examine creative adaptations of *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's most reflexive meditation on the artist as creator, controller, and choreographer of brave new worlds. Margaret Atwood and Emily St. John Mandel talk back to Shakespeare's metadrama by conjuring up their own *Tempest*-tossed metafiction. In "'The Isle Is Full of Noises': The Many Tempests of Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed*," Melissa Caldwell uses adaptation theory (particularly the work of Gérard Genette, Linda Hutcheon, and Dennis Cutchins) to mark up the score of Atwood's

multivocal reinterpretation of Shakespeare's swan song. In *Hag-Seed* the Prospero-figure is Felix Phillips, an actor and theater director who specializes in radical stage adaptations of Shakespeare. After years of professional exile, Felix finds himself teaching at the Fletcher Correctional Institute, where he and the inmates mount a production of *The Tempest*. As Caldwell points out, this scenario provides multiple opportunities for Atwood to embed paratexts that respond to Shakespeare's play and shed self-referential light on the process of creative adaptation. Even the adaptation is subject to adaptation when the prisoners from "Team Hag-Seed" begin improvising original songs for Caliban, taking a marginalized character in Shakespeare's play and giving him a more central role and emphatic voice. Atwood is one of the most persistent and sophisticated adaptors in all of contemporary fiction, and Caldwell builds a compelling case for *Hag-Seed* as one of the novelist's greatest multivocal triumphs yet.

Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* gained a reputation for prophecy during the Covid pandemic for its eerily prescient depiction of the fictional Georgia Flu pandemic, which devastates the world's population. Even before that uncanny coincidence, the novel was much admired by Shakespeareans for its depictions of the Traveling Symphony, a nomadic group devoted to keeping Shakespeare's work alive after the pandemic. Mandel memorably opens her novel with the onstage death of Arthur Leander while performing *King Lear*. Although *Lear* remains a major touchstone throughout the novel, Graley Herren argues that the core source text for *Station Eleven* is *The Tempest*. He reads the character Miranda Carroll as the Prospero-figure of the novel. Overtly, Miranda is the creator of two volumes of graphic novels called *Dr. Eleven*. Covertly, according to Herren, Miranda is meant to be understood as the embedded author of the *entire* novel—all of *Station Eleven*—including both the pre- and post-pandemic plotlines. In "The Prospero of Wonderland; or, Miranda Carroll, Author of *Station Eleven*," Herren marshals evidence for interpreting Miranda as Wizard of her own Oz, Prospero of her own magic metafictional island. He argues that her character arc also mirrors that of Prospero, moving from revenge against those who wronged her before the pandemic toward atonement, forgiveness, and mercy in the post-pandemic world. Readers of *Comparative Drama* may never see *Station Eleven* quite the same way again after viewing it from Herren's perspective.

The editors wish to thank the Comparative Drama Conference in Orlando for hosting the initial panels in 2021 that eventually led to this special issue. One of the audience members for those panels was Dan Knapper, and he graciously approached us with the idea for a special issue of articles expanded from our conference papers. We enthusiastically took him up on the offer. Circumstances prevented one of our Orlando panelists from contributing to this issue, but everyone else eagerly signed on board, and we happily added Vanessa I. Corredera and Hannibal Hamlin along the way. Dan has been unflagging in his support at each stage of the process, as have our colleagues in the Department of English and the College of Arts and Sciences at Xavier University. Writing, assembling, and editing this special issue together has been both a joy and a privilege, and we are very excited to share this cutting-edge scholarship with the readers of *Comparative Drama*.

Xavier University

NOTES

¹ Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005), 3.

² Martha Tuck Rozett, *Talking Back to Shakespeare* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994), 5.

³ Jo Eldridge Carney, *Women Talk Back to Shakespeare: Contemporary Adaptations and Appropriations* (London: Routledge, 2022), 2.

⁴ Graham Holderness, *Tales from Shakespeare: Creative Collisions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), xiii.