
Ian McEwan Celebrates Shakespeare

Hamlet in a Nutshell

Elena Bandín and Elisa González

Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse Ian McEwan's *Nutshell*, published in September 2016, as a modern rewriting of *Hamlet* in relation to the usual issues and themes previously tackled by the author throughout his narrative. The novel focuses on the love triangle involving Claude [Claudius], Trudy [Gertrude] and John Cairncross [King Hamlet] and narrates how the lovers plot the murder of the husband from the unusual perspective of a proto-Hamlet in the womb. Despite the fact that he is rewriting a Shakespearean work, the author remains faithful to his style and favourite topics, displaying the function of the family as destructive rather than constructive, conditioning the later development of the children and rendering them devoid of the affection needed. Similarly, *Nutshell* also depicts his recurrent configuration of mothers as authoritative and destructive, especially for the natural growth of their offspring.

Keywords: adaptation, appropriation, Ian McEwan's *Nutshell*, rewriting, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

In 2016, the culture industry celebrated Shakespeare's life, works and enduring legacy with massive events in the UK and across the world, proving 'that Shakespeare is the swiftest conduit to understanding the great similarities that pull the world together, but also, more importantly, the fundamental differences'.¹ One year earlier, the Hogarth Press, founded by Virginia and Leonard Woolf in 1917, launched the Hogarth Shakespeare Project aimed at offering Shakespearean prose rewritings by acclaimed contemporary authors: Jeanette Winterson's *The Gap of Time* (*The Winter's Tale*) was followed by Howard Jacobson's *Shylock is My Name* (*The Merchant of Venice*), Anne Tyler's *Vinegar Girl* (*The Taming of the Shrew*), Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed* (*The Tempest*), Tracy Chevalier's *New Boy* (*Othello*), Gillian Flynn's *Hamlet*, Jo Nesbø's *Macbeth* and Edward St Aubyn's *King Lear*. Hogarth Press commissioned a number of best-loved novelists to take the plays of Shakespeare and use them to create something entirely their own in an attempt to follow in Shakespeare's steps as the greatest re-teller of stories and in order to introduce his works to a new generation of readers. Although the initiative was promising for the media, the



project turned out to be rather disappointing. Reviewing Ann Tyler's *Vinegar Girl*, one critic from *The Guardian* pointed out:

While these might be great authors who write great books – and under their own steam they might well want to write something inspired by an existing work – the process of commissioning these works ramps up the pressure and gives the whole enterprise an artificiality that is hard to overcome. In some ways it's a noble and bold gesture, potentially bringing new readers to the classics. But let's admit that it's also marketing gone mad.²

When reading the reviews of any of the works individually, critics seem to agree that all these great novelists' original works are better than these retellings written at the request of a publishing house, Atwood's *Hag-Seed* being the most acclaimed.³ Angeles de la Concha even argues that, in fact, all the novels are surpassed by Ian McEwan's rewriting of *Hamlet*, *Nutshell*.⁴

Nutshell is a funny and captivating novel that deals with an unnamed thirty-eight-week-old foetus gifted with the ability of eavesdropping from the womb on everything that goes on around him. Thanks to this secret listening, he relates from his own point of view the adulterous affair that his mother, Trudy (Gertrude), maintains with her brother-in-law, real estate developer Claude (*Hamlet's* Claudius), and how they plot the murder of her actual husband, John Cairncross, a melancholic hero of literature and noble publisher.⁵ John is prevented from taking care of his pregnant wife and is expelled from the decaying Georgian family townhouse in central London. After moving out, John apparently begins life anew with an aspiring 'owl poet', Elodie, who turns out to be his apprentice. Since the betrayed husband refuses to accept the failure of the marriage, Claude persuades Trudy to poison the contents of a bottle of juice in order to get rid of him.

McEwan fleshes out some marginal characters from the original play and he also reduces the number of people in the action, getting rid of important figures, such as Ophelia, whose relationship is essential to comprehend the development of Hamlet's feigned madness. Thus, this appropriation provides the background of the extramarital affair, setting aside that of Claudius's counsellor, Polonius, and his children, Ophelia and Laertes. However, a female figure, Elodie, is included to cast doubt on John Cairncross's fidelity and purity of sentiments towards Trudy as well as to hinder the attainment of Claude's ultimate goal of killing his brother.

There are not many direct references throughout the novel to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (apart from the title, *Nutshell*). Not even the baby is bound to be called this way, but anybody familiar with the original play would identify the unborn narrator with Shakespeare's main character. When interviewed by *The Australian*, McEwan denied his intention to rewrite *Hamlet*, stating: 'I didn't really intend to write a version of *Hamlet*. It just sort of crept in'.⁶ Nonetheless, allusions to the original are everywhere. The novel's title derives from *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene II – 'I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself king of infinite space' – as does the plot. The confinement of this character in a womb

symbolises the state of Denmark in the original play: 'To be bound in a nutshell, see the world in two inches of ivory, in a grain of sand'.⁷ *Nutshell* is not located in Denmark, but, unambiguously, in London: 'Instead I'll inherit a less than united kingdom ruled by an esteemed elderly queen'.⁸ Not only does the geographical location change, but so does the inhabited dwelling, switching the magnificent castle of Elsinore for the family house of the unborn baby's father: 'A Georgian pile on boastful Hamilton Terrace was my father's childhood home'.⁹ In addition, the plot is updated to the contemporary era when neither hunger nor disease are widespread: 'I'll inherit a condition of modernity ... and inhabit a privileged corner of the planet – well-fed, plague-free Western Europe'.¹⁰ Furthermore, thanks to the current affairs mentioned in the podcasts Trudy usually listens to, such as the conflict in the Middle East which it is feared could trigger a world war, the context can be further determined: the story occurs around 2015–2016.

Hamlet has been adapted to every mode and genre and, although the figure of an unborn narrator might seem brand new, there have been other talking unborn babies throughout the history of literature.¹¹ Appropriations of this Shakespearean story had already been carried out by authors but never from the viewpoint of an unborn Hamlet in his third trimester. Ian McEwan is almost certainly the first writer to combine both: rewriting *Hamlet* from the point of view of a foetus. Julie Sanders argues that 'what places *Hamlet* at the centre of the twentieth-century literary canon is the influence of Freud and theories of psychoanalysis, as the exploration of a man in crisis'.¹² Modern literary rewritings borrow a wide range of aspects from the source text and reinterpret them to offer a different perspective, a shift in the central character being the most predominant to avoid the constraints of knowing only those facts concerning the traditional main figure, Hamlet. Ophelia has also been the subject of study of many reinterpretations because of her intense relationship with Hamlet, including *Ophelia* (2001) by Jeremy Trafford and 'The Rose of Elsinore' by Mary Cowden Clarke, belonging to the collection *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (1850), among others.

Following Linda Hutcheon,¹³ *Nutshell* entails a transition from the showing mode to the telling mode, focused on the problematic love triangle (King Hamlet, Claudius and Gertrude). McEwan is not the first writer to speculate in some way on the triangle of Claudius, King Hamlet and Gertrude. *Gertrude and Claudius* by John Updike intends to figure out the starting point of the incestuous affair and the possible cooperative murder of King Hamlet.¹⁴ The short story 'Gertrude Talks Back' by Margaret Atwood restricts the focus of discussion to the extent of displaying Scene IV of Act III of *Hamlet*, the juncture when Hamlet confronts his mother, reproaching her for the incestuous marriage and dishonesty towards his dead father.¹⁵ Unlike the original play, in this extension of the scene Atwood only gives voice to Gertrude for her to tell Hamlet the truth, rather than being silenced because of her supposed frailty. Consequently, this renewed woman embodies the feminist reactionary power against the untoward misjudgements of men because she decided to marry

a second husband, which is rejected in most cases as an offence to loyalty. Atwood's short story differs from the vast majority of rewritings in blaming not only Claudius, but somebody else, for King Hamlet's death: Gertrude herself.¹⁶ While the revelation of King Hamlet's ghost in the Shakespearean version indicts Claudius, Atwood dismisses this idea in favour of the reinforcement of Gertrude's misery in the company of King Hamlet, to the extent that her only way out was to end his life. Surprisingly, she is fearless, and even proud, to admit this homicide, refusing to allow her son to belittle Claudius: 'It wasn't Claudius, darling. It was me'.¹⁷

McEwan acknowledged during a conference that the idea of bestowing on a foetus the power of narrating a story came out of nowhere, while he was daydreaming at a boring meeting in a foreign language about himself. He also declared that, by that time, he was re-reading random pages from *Hamlet*, 'as Shakespeare is a continuous source of inspiration for all English writers'.¹⁸ The sentence that came to his mind opens the work pointedly, portraying the actual situation of this extremely unusual narrator: 'So here I am, upside down in a woman'.¹⁹

Interviewed by Sebastian Groes in 2007, McEwan stated that he had lost interest in first-person narrators: 'I want narrative authority. ... I want the authorial presence taking full responsibility for everything. ... Of course there is a way of loading a first-person narrative voice with authorial insight, or brilliant turns of phrase, but most writers don't try for this – it's difficult'.²⁰ Part of *Nutshell's* originality resides precisely here; we find a proto-Hamlet first-person narrator loaded with McEwan's authorial insight, although too often the baby's voice is drowned out by its creator. To be a foetus is a very privileged position from the point of view of narrative, allowing McEwan to reflect upon themes and issues that are often the distinctive marks of his narrative: the breaking of social conventions, codes and taboos, incest, sex and murder, family relationships, politics, history, science or identity and gender politics. The foetus' interior monologue and that monologue's encounter with the truth in the outside world show McEwan's ability to replicate consciousness.

Due to his interest in psychoanalysis as a structure for understanding the self and the world, much of McEwan's work is concerned with innocence, particularly about what it means to be a child and what it means to lose one.²¹ McEwan has also deeply explored the relationship between childhood and adulthood and the different bonds between fathers and mothers and their offspring. *Nutshell* can be aligned with his anti-Oedipal narratives (such as *The Innocent* and *The Child in Time*), where he depicts a complex and curious figure of the child that 'allows us to open McEwan's work away from the private realm of family relationships to the public realms of politics and history'.²² According to the author, 'as the influence of Freud in literary and intellectual culture has faded, we have returned to the idea that childhood is a form of innocence ... They come into the world not responsible for it, and they are sometimes acted upon by people with terrible intent'.²³ This perspective is present in *The Child in Time*, a novel about an innocent three-year-old girl, Kate, who gets lost in a

supermarket and never returns to the family household. As Claire Colebrook points out, it 'presents the loss of the child and its connection with politics literally – for the central character's search for his abducted daughter is intertwined with an account of a government enquiry into child development'.²⁴ The vision of the child as 'a world closed in upon itself'²⁵ is voiced by one of the members of a sub-committee that Stephen, the girl's father, is taking part in: 'by forcing literacy on to children between the ages of five and seven, we introduce a degree of abstraction which shatters the unity of the child's world view'.²⁶ Furthermore, Stephen's friend, Charles Darke, abandons publishing activity to engage in politics, but after retiring he behaves like a child, despite living in the family household with Thelma, his wife: 'once a businessman and politician, now he was a successful pre-pubescent'.²⁷

McEwan has experimented with the unreliable narrator in previous works – Briony Tallis in *Atonement*, for example – but in *Nutshell* we are confronted with an *over*-reliable narrator who reflects upon his own condition and who possesses a profound knowledge of the world with which he is going to be confronted. After the development of his central nervous system, the unborn baby is aware of the physical changes his body is undergoing: 'Many weeks ago, my neutral groove closed upon itself to become my spine and my many million young neurons'.²⁸ He wonders about the moment when he begins to think and, definitely, *to be* himself as an individual, not just a foetus inside a woman's womb: 'I once drifted in my translucent body bag, floated dreamily in the bubble of my thoughts through my private ocean in slow-motion somersaults'.²⁹ Nevertheless, this narrator does not regard himself as a completely developed human being because he has not completed the last stage of gestation and is still confined to his mother's uterus: 'I'm still a creature of the sea, not a human like the others'.³⁰ It is obvious that this foetus goes beyond the laws of nature because of his innate knowledge of the world he is about to join. Therefore, instead of being an entirely innocent creature, he is 'like Humbert Humbert in Nabokov's *Lolita*; the same grand elegiac tone; the same infinite knowledge of history and English poetry, the same covetous, obsessively physical eye'.³¹ His source of knowledge is apparently the podcasts his mother usually listens to: 'How is it that I, not even young, not even born yesterday, could know so much, or know enough to be wrong about so much? I have my sources, I listen'.³² As Colebrook notes,

McEwan's writing deconstructs the opposition between knowing and not knowing, between science and art, between adult and child, between sexuality and innocence. The condition for knowing, speaking, narrating or adopting an adult point of view of mature relations is a recognition that the world is not one's own, that relations to others are mediated and that we are subjected to a system not of our making.³³

Likewise, the main character in *The Child in Time* functions as an *over*-reliable narrator. Stephen Lewis, a writer of children's books, maintains a fairly distant relationship with his parents because he was sent to boarding school

at the age of twelve and had not had the chance to spend his youth with them. At the beginning of the novel, he confesses to having been unaware of his parents' existence before conceiving him and the mystery that surrounded their previous life: 'however familiar, parents are also strangers to their children'.³⁴ On one occasion, he has an odd flashback and witnesses them as a young, unmarried couple having a conversation in a café about whether to interrupt pregnancy or not: 'whatever it was, he did not want the child. That was what was on his mind. It was abortion'.³⁵ He realises that the unborn baby they are referring to is himself. Surprisingly, his mother saw his face at the window while Stephen was staring at them, which made her abandon the idea of getting rid of the unborn baby. Thus, in this fragment, Stephen is portrayed as a witness in the same way as the narrator of *Nutshell*: they both overhear, and witness in the case of Stephen, private conversations, becoming aware of their parents' lack of desire for offspring and, consequently, their birth is jeopardised.

This foetus is gifted with a prodigious imagination as well, recalling the inner world of Peter in *The Daydreamer*, who belongs to nowhere and makes up an alternative mental reality. Unlike Peter, the unborn baby has not been in real contact with the outside world and, consequently, his daydreaming is not constrained by his sensory perception. This narrator is conceived as completely trustworthy, because he has not been corrupted by the outside world; thus, the lack of firm convictions and prejudices as well as religious beliefs implies his reliability: 'No one to contradict or reprimand me, no name or previous address, no religion, no debts, no enemies'.³⁶ However, the lack of experience of the real world leads him to misunderstandings and sometimes to getting things wrong: for instance, the assumption of his father's endless love is at odds with his actual carelessness, not even taking his birth into account. This profoundly disappoints the unborn baby who had conceived his future by his side.

According to Biwu Shang, 'through rewriting Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, McEwan pays tribute to Shakespeare on the one hand, and he projects his own view on the ethics of life on the other hand', reminding us that we are moral beings.³⁷ McEwan declares himself atheist but respectful: 'my own view of religion is that people must be free to worship all the gods they want. But it's only the secular spirit that will guarantee that freedom'.³⁸ Religion is the framework through which Hamlet judges what is wrong or right; he complies with the commandments of God and becomes even more pious after the shock suffered because of the incestuous marriage.³⁹ Hamlet's religious faith is also reflected in his behaviour when refusing to commit suicide. The foetus, like *Hamlet*, is constantly hesitating between waiting patiently in his mother's womb and taking revenge for his father's murder. At one point in *Nutshell*, the narrator tries to interrupt Trudy and Claude's plot by strangling himself with his umbilical cord. Ironically, McEwan's narrator ponders suicide because he cannot bear the sexual encounters of Trudy and Claude. Every time they have sex, the baby is apparently running a risk of being injured because of the advanced state of pregnancy and, consequently, intercourse should be

avoided at this stage: 'I'll say it fast: I'm going to kill myself. An infant death, a homicide in effect, due to my uncle's reckless assault'.⁴⁰ As the foetus does not profess religious faith, nothing prevents him from attempting to kill himself: 'To take the life I'll need the cord, three turns around my neck of the mortal coil', although he eventually fails.⁴¹ Because of his condition as a hedonist, this unborn baby is certainly eager to enjoy the pleasures of the world he is about to join: 'I want my go. I want to *become*'.⁴² Undoubtedly, it is 'life after birth' that he pursues, and surrender cannot be contemplated.⁴³ His hedonism is at odds with the commandments of God, since he enjoys small pleasures like the intake of alcohol. The atheist condition of the author is also present in the treatment of sex, including fornication and female pleasure, since Trudy, as a *monstrous mother*, cannot restrain her sexual instincts, resulting in incestuous behaviour.

In McEwan's fiction, one hardly ever finds representations of the nuclear family. The function of the family is destructive, rather than constructive, as the death of one or both parents, as well as voluntary abandonments, conditions the later development of the children, rendering them devoid of the affection needed.⁴⁴ Not only does isolation exert influence over his characters, but so do childhood traumas caused by physical and sexual abuse, domestic violence and inadequate relationships among relatives. Consequently, these figures undergo insufficient growth, which ends up spoiling their relations when they become adults. One of the most impressive examples is found in 'Dead as They Come', belonging to the collection *First Love, Last Rites*. It is the story of a wealthy man who, after three failed marriages, falls in love with a mannequin in a shop window. He behaves as if they were a real couple, making love to her and getting angry at her silence. This insane behaviour is obviously the consequence of childhood traumas and an inadequate sexual education: 'my father's death rattle, my mother's terror of sexuality, my own sexual initiation with an elder cousin'.⁴⁵

In *Nutshell*, the unborn baby witnesses the progressive separation of his parents as his mother's adulterous affair acquires importance, jeopardising his possibilities of joining a united family: 'His [Claude's] existence denies my rightful claims to a happy life in the care of both parents'.⁴⁶ The source of the problems of this disrupted family seems to be the childlike jealousy felt by Claude: 'You hated your brother because you could never be the man he was'.⁴⁷ Therefore, this relationship between the estranged brothers in their infancy brings about inadequate parental and sexual behaviour in adulthood. Certainly, apart from an uncontrollable sexual desire, Claude shows no further evidence of affection towards his lover: 'Nothing tender, no fond dozing in a lovers' tangled clasp'.⁴⁸ This insensitivity is also the culprit of the loathing felt for the baby to the extent of endangering his life through inappropriate sexual practices posing a risk to the foetus: 'By this last stage they should be refraining on my behalf. Courtesy, if not clinical judgement demands it'.⁴⁹

In *The Comfort of Strangers*, McEwan introduces two prototypical couples of his fiction epitomising different affective and social roles. Mary and Colin, the

protagonists, make the acquaintance of a sadomasochist local couple, Robert and Caroline, who posit that women should yield to their husbands on the grounds that they all 'enjoy being beaten up'.⁵⁰ This extreme sexual violence derives from the physical abuse Robert suffered every time his father punished him. Although these strangers distort the visitors' image of a usual relationship, this unexpected factor makes their lovemaking thrilling, recovering sexual desire. Indeed, in *Nutshell*, Trudy only feels aroused by maintaining the secret relationship with Claude. Throughout McEwan's fiction, incestuous relationships are explored in a number of ways, from the immoral affair between a wife and her brother-in-law, as exemplified in *Nutshell*, to the discovery of sexuality among inexperienced siblings. In the short story 'Homemade', McEwan introduces a teenager who is willing to touch a woman's genitals and, in order to get practice, induces his ten-year-old sister to have sex with him. Unlike this initiatory sexual ritual, the incestuous relationship found in *The Cement Garden* is a way to meet the affectional needs inherent in being orphaned.⁵¹ In this novel, Jack and Julie maintain a secret relationship, even when the latter is in a relationship with a boy named Derek, who catches them in bed: 'it is sick, ... he's your *brother*'.⁵²

Biographical details about McEwan's family also help us to fully comprehend the configuration of Trudy's character. His mother, Rose Moore, married Ernest Wort, who died during the Normandy landings in 1944. While he was away, she maintained an extramarital relationship with David McEwan, an army officer. An undesired child was the fruit of this secret affair, who was handed over to strangers in a railway station. After her former husband's death, Rose married her lover David McEwan and gave birth to Ian in 1948. Unfortunately, Ian did not encounter his brother, David Sharp, until recently, when the latter decided to trace his origins.⁵³ Probably because of his background, McEwan's women are not submissive; they 'regularly mutilate the men physically, emotionally, materially – denying their existence as meaningful human beings, depriving them of their children ... Men are unable to cope with adult women'.⁵⁴ In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Gertrude is portrayed as an old woman and, as such, she can no longer experience sexual desire. On the contrary, McEwan's Trudy regains full possession of her female body and of her sexuality, reversing the gender ideology of female chastity and male promiscuity. Despite McEwan's supposed feminism, 'the women he presents are often far from admirable themselves', and 'many of McEwan's female figures echo very traditional feminine stereotypes'.⁵⁵ Trudy represents the archetype of the *monstrous mother*, encoded as 'an emblem of lust', reinforcing the Christian negative reading of fertility which regards the fecund female body as the site of sin.⁵⁶ These mothers are unable to repress their sexual desires and, consequently, they refuse to accept the passive female role. But their acts are 'presented as physically disgusting or psychologically damaging and often both'.⁵⁷

As a consequence of their sexual behaviour, they tend to reproduce often, which is not the case with Trudy as she is already pregnant with her first child at the start of the action. However, the fact that this pregnancy is undesired

evidences the frequency of her lovemaking as a source of mere pleasure. Although *monstrous mothers* are usually depicted with ‘physical characteristics of animals, dragons, dogs and asses’,⁵⁸ Trudy is a symbol of beauty. She is constantly eroticised and conceived as a modern Lolita, ‘corrupted and corrupting’, whose daily garments are shorts and bikini tops and ‘pink-framed, heart-shaped sunglasses’.⁵⁹ Moreover, her genitals are negatively described as ‘the Wall of Death’ until she eventually gives birth: ‘What was in his day a vagina, is now proudly a birth canal’.⁶⁰

Not only does Trudy cause psychological harm to the foetus by being unfaithful to John Cairncross, but she also causes physical harm by drinking wine despite her advanced state of pregnancy. Certainly, the intake of alcohol can bring about disabilities in the foetus, such as foetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs), an issue that the narrator is aware of: ‘I know that alcohol will lower my intelligence. It lowers everybody’s intelligence’.⁶¹ Not only does Trudy seem to forget about her baby, but she also considers the possibility of getting rid of him once he has been born: ‘*And... We’ve placed the baby somewhere. ... Placed is the lying cognate of dumped. As the baby is of me. Somewhere is a liar too. Ruthless mother!*’.⁶² The baby suffers by his mother’s subversion of his plan to join a united family: ‘My mother has preferred my father’s brother, cheated her husband, ruined her son. My uncle has stolen his brother’s wife, deceived his nephew’s father, grossly insulted his sister-in-law’s son’.⁶³ This soliloquy recalls the passage in the original play when Hamlet confronts Gertrude so as to decry her wrong choice in substituting King Hamlet: since Trudy is not at all offended by the foetus’ offences because of the obvious lack of communication between them, she does not react or defend herself, echoing the Shakespearean Gertrude who is silenced.

McEwan had previously employed this monstrous female figure in his early works, such as the short story ‘Disguises’, belonging to his collection *First Love, Last Rites*. A ten-year-old orphan, Henry, is delivered to his aunt Mina – an old actress whose last role on stage was Goneril – who intends to replace her mother in order to fill the void caused by being unmarried and childless. Although she considers the boy to be in need of a ‘real mother’, she is a ‘surreal mother’. Mina forces her nephew to transgress the boundaries of masculinity by dressing up like a woman, which apparently arouses her to the extent of groping his body: ‘She was excited by his presence and appearance, for twice in the meal she got up from her place to come to kiss and hug him where he sat and run his fingers through the fabric’.⁶⁴

An extreme case of inadaptation caused by a progenitor’s death and a *monstrous mother* is expressed in ‘Conversation with a Cupboard Man’. The trait of fertility related to this sort of mother is made explicit at the very beginning of the story: ‘All she wanted was to have children’.⁶⁵ Indeed, all the protagonist’s social problems as he grows up stem from the atrocities committed by the *monstrous mother*, altering the proper development of her offspring: ‘I never saw my father because he died before I was born. I think my problems started right there – it was my mother who brought me up and no one else’.⁶⁶ This

mother prevents her son from learning to speak until he turns eighteen, and certainly prevents him from growing up, but he cannot run away because her reality is the only world he is acquainted with: 'I don't want to be free. That's why I envy these babies I see in the street being bundled and carried about by their mothers'.⁶⁷ All she seemingly wants is to have him back in her womb: 'She was too busy trying to push me back up her womb'.⁶⁸ Apart from the obvious relation of the uterus, the author draws parallels between this story and *Nutshell* because the unborn baby cannot prevent himself from loving his evil mother: 'the mystery of how love for my mother swells in proportion to my hatred'; because he is also physically and psychologically dependent on her: 'She made herself my only parent. I won't survive without her'.⁶⁹

The mistreatment John Cairncross has to endure in *Nutshell* can only be understood in relation to McEwan's previous works because of his recurrent configuration of mothers and wives as authoritative and destructive, especially for the natural growth of their offspring. John Cairncross plays the role of the betrayed father, prevented from taking care of the baby the *monstrous mother* is gestating. This updated version of King Hamlet struggles to maintain his position in the family every time he sees his chances of a happy marriage dwindling: 'My father longs for ... his wife and, surely, his son'.⁷⁰ At the start of the action, the unborn narrator takes his parental love for granted: 'No need for an umbilical cord. My father and I are joined in hopeless love', and assumes his fatherhood.⁷¹ Nevertheless, the baby surmises that he shares part of his genome with Claude, which, unfortunately, joins them together: 'My uncle – a quarter of my genome ... What depictable part of myself is Claude and how will I know?'⁷² His conjecture goes a step further, to the extent of defying heredity, as he is frightened of his uncle's sperm 'seed[ing] his thoughts': 'Then, brain-damaged, I'll think and speak like him. I'll be the son of Claude'.⁷³ Although in the beginning the narrator takes his father's love for granted and would prefer to be poisoned with him instead of being placed somewhere else, he ends up realising that not even John awaits his birth: 'What was I in my father's peroration? Dead. ... Not even a mention, not in an aside, not even dismissed as an irrelevance'.⁷⁴ Therefore, it is implied that once the baby is born, he will lack parental affection, as is the case for the majority of McEwan's characters.

The reason McEwan chose *Hamlet* as the basis for his reinterpretation seems to be the themes it develops, as they are similar to the central issues of his narratives. Thus, despite the fact that he is rewriting a Shakespearean work, the author remains faithful to his style and favourite topics. *Nutshell* does not tamper with the original play, but offers a renewed version that amplifies the source text and 'brings together McEwan's enduring strengths – lurid imagination, black humour and the ability to put these at the service of a compelling narrative'.⁷⁵ In *Nutshell*, McEwan masterfully blends together themes and characters from *Hamlet* with aspects of his previous works, so as to create a unique literary work entirely his own.

Acknowledgements

The research for this work has been funded by the project ‘La recepción de las obras de Shakespeare en la cultura española y europea II’ [Ref.: PGC2018-094427-B-I00]. We are grateful to the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities for its support.

Elena Bandín lectures in English Literature and Gender Studies at the University of León, Spain. She has done extensive research on the reception of Shakespeare’s works in Spain with a particular interest in translation, performance and censorship. She is a member of the international research project ‘Shakespeare’s Works in European Culture’ coordinated by the University of Murcia and led by Dr Juan F. Cerdá and Dr Keith Gregor. She has published articles in national and international journals such as *SEDERI Yearbook* and *Cognitive Linguistics*, and chapters in volumes such as *Shakespeare and Tyranny: Regimes of Reading in Europe and Beyond* (Cambridge Scholars, 2014) and *Romeo and Juliet in European Culture* (John Benjamins, 2017). She is currently co-editing the volume *Othello in European Culture* (John Benjamins).

Email: ebanf@unileon.es; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9997-1469>.

Elisa González graduated in English Studies in 2017 and in Spanish Linguistics and Literature in 2018 from the University of León. She later completed her MA in Translation and Intercultural Mediation at the University of Salamanca in 2019. Email: elisaglezg@usal.es

Notes

1. Dominic Dromgoole, ‘Shakespeare: The Playwright Who Brings the Word Closer’, *The Guardian*, 23 April 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/apr/23/shakespeare-globe-dominic-dromgoole-complete-walk-william-hamlet>.
2. Viv Groskop, ‘Vinegar Girl by Ann Tyler Review – Skilled but Pointless Shakespeare Retread’, *The Guardian*, 12 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jun/12/anne-tyler-vinegar-girl-review-taming-shrew-update>.
3. On *Vinegar Girl*: ‘Maybe there’s fun to be had in working out how Tyler can stay true to the original while still creating something in her own voice. But instead of a tribute, it just feels like tying the hands of an author who’s perfectly capable of creating her own world and really doesn’t need to borrow someone else’s. No, not even Shakespeare’s. Verdict? Fun, accomplished, readable, enjoyable. But Anne Tyler originals do all this and so much more’. Groskop, ‘Vinegar Girl by Ann Tyler Review’. On *Hag-Seed*: ‘Set all that aside, though, as this is written with such gusto and mischief that it feels so much like something Atwood would have written anyway. The joy and hilarity of it just sing off the page. It’s a magical eulogy to Shakespeare, leading the reader through a fantastical reworking of the original but infusing it with ironic nods to contemporary culture, thrilling to anyone who knows *The Tempest* intimately, but equally compelling to anyone not overly familiar with the work’. Viv Groskop, ‘Hag-Seed Review – Margaret Atwood Turns *The Tempest* into a Perfect Storm’, *The Guardian*, 16 October 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/16/hag-seed-review-margaret-atwood-tempest-hogarth-shakespeare>. On *New Boy*: ‘But, deprived

- of the complex opacity of Shakespeare's theatrical vision, and lacking the wild teenage darkness of, for instance, *Lord of the Flies*, her novel becomes linear, reductive and almost banal – a playground scrap, in which a prized strawberry pencil case must stand in for Desdemona's fatal handkerchief'. Robert McCrum, 'New Boy by Tracy Chevalier Review – A Vexed Retelling of Othello', *The Guardian*, 14 May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/14/new-boy-tracy-chevalier-review-othello>.
4. Ángeles de la Concha, 'Shakespeare en la imaginación contemporánea: reescrituras en su cuarto centenario' (lecture, University of León, León, Spain, 24 November 2016). Retrieved from <https://videos.unileon.es/video/1461>.
 5. The names of the characters are not completely preserved. McEwan shortens the name of Gertrude and modifies the spelling of Claudius: Trudy and Claude. In addition, the third member of the love triangle, King Hamlet, is renamed as John Cairncross, who was an essayist about the self in Shakespeare's time. Ironically, although the unborn narrator evokes the figure of Hamlet, the author renders the main character unnamed throughout the novel.
 6. Rosemary Neill, 'Ian McEwan on New Novel *Nutshell*, Hamlet, His Brother and the Bard', *The Australian*, 27 August 2016.
 7. Ian McEwan, *Nutshell* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016), 62.
 8. *Ibid.*, 3.
 9. *Ibid.*, 12.
 10. *Ibid.*, 3.
 11. As in Carlos Fuentes' *Christopher Unborn* (1987), a catastrophic story set in Mexico whose narrator ponders whether being born in such a destroyed setting is worthy or not. Even in exotic literature traditions, such as the Indian, some parallels can be found: in a version of the epic *Mahābhārata*, Abhimanyu, in his mother's womb, eavesdrops on his father planning a battle strategy with his wife.
 12. Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 54.
 13. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
 14. John Updike, *Gertrude and Claudius* (London: Penguin Books, 2000).
 15. Margaret Atwood, 'Gertrude Talks Back', in *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 1994).
 16. Cindy Chopoidaló, 'The Possible Worlds of *Hamlet*: Shakespeare as Adaptor, Adaptations of Shakespeare' (PhD diss., University of Alberta, 2009), 133.
 17. Atwood, 'Gertrude Talks Back', 19.
 18. Ian McEwan, 'Ian McEwan on His Novel *Nutshell* – Books Podcast', *The Guardian*, 2 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2016/sep/02/ian-mcewan-on-his-novel-nutshell-books-podcast>.
 19. McEwan, *Nutshell*, 1.
 20. Jon Cook, Sebastian Groes and Victor Sage, 'Journeys without Maps: An Interview with Ian McEwan', in *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Approaches*, ed. Sebastian Groes (London: Continuum, 2009), 133.
 21. Claire Colebrook, 'The *Innocent* as Anti-Oedipal Critique of Cultural Pornography', in Groes, *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 43.
 22. *Ibid.*, 45.
 23. Cook et al., 'Journeys without Maps', 124.
 24. Colebrook, 'The *Innocent* as Anti-Oedipal Critique', 47.
 25. *Ibid.*, 45.
 26. Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time* (London: Vintage, 1992 [1987]), 81.
 27. *Ibid.*, 117.
 28. McEwan, *Nutshell*, 2.
 29. *Ibid.*, 1.
 30. *Ibid.*, 100.
 31. Kate Clanchy, '*Nutshell* by Ian McEwan Review – An Elegiac Masterpiece', *The Guardian*, 27 August 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/27/nutshell-by-ian-mcewan-review>.
 32. McEwan, *Nutshell*, 4.

33. Colebrook, 'The Innocent as Anti-Oedipal Critique', 53.
34. McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 57.
35. *Ibid.*, 190.
36. McEwan, *Nutshell*, 2.
37. Biwu Shang, 'Ethical Literary Criticism and Ian McEwan's *Nutshell*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 59, no. 2 (2018), 142–153, here 153.
38. FRONTLINE, 'Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero', Ian McEwan interviewed by Helen Whitney, April 2002, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/faith/interviews/mcewan.html>.
39. Omar Abdulaziz Alsaif, 'The Significance of Religion in *Hamlet*', *International Journal of English and Literature* 3, no. 6 (2012), 132–135, here 132.
40. McEwan, *Nutshell*, 127.
41. *Ibid.*, 127.
42. *Ibid.*, 129.
43. *Ibid.*, 160.
44. Fernando Galván, *Formas nuevas de la ficción británica contemporánea: David Lodge, Ian McEwan y Salman Rushdie* (Universidad de La Laguna: Secretariado de Publicaciones, 1998), 55.
45. Ian McEwan, *First Love, Last Rites* (London: Vintage, 1997 [1975]), 69.
46. McEwan, *Nutshell*, 20.
47. *Ibid.*, 120.
48. *Ibid.*, 23.
49. *Ibid.*, 21.
50. Ian McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers* (London: Vintage, 2001 [1981]), 71.
51. Galván, *Formas nuevas de la ficción británica contemporánea*, 61.
52. Ian McEwan, *The Cement Garden* (London: Vintage, 1997 [1978]), 136.
53. Alan Cowell, 'Ian McEwan's Life Takes Twist with Discovery of a Brother', *The New York Times*, 17 January 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/17/arts/17iht-brother.4240717.html>. McEwan's personal background has exerted a powerful influence over his narrative: he reflects his own mother, Rose Moore, in some way on many of his female main characters, such as Trudy. The possibility of the narrator being abandoned once he is born recalls the handing over of the author's brother at a railway station in order to conceal the infidelity of his mother. Indeed, the author acknowledged the unborn baby of *Nutshell* to be the fruit of the extramarital affair, unambiguously pointing at himself because his father is not his mother's first husband, but the lover with whom she contracted marriage afterwards.
54. Jack Jr. Slay, *Ian McEwan* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 81.
55. David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 14.
56. Marilyn Francus, 'The Monstrous Mother: Reproductive Anxiety in Swift and Pope', *Elh* 61, no. 4 (1994), 829–851, here 829.
57. *Ibid.*, 830.
58. *Ibid.*, 830.
59. Clanchy, 'Nutshell by Ian McEwan Review'.
60. McEwan, *Nutshell*, 196.
61. *Ibid.*, 7.
62. *Ibid.*, 43.
63. *Ibid.*, 33.
64. McEwan, *First Love, Last Rites*, 133.
65. *Ibid.*, 89.
66. *Ibid.*, 89.
67. *Ibid.*, 105.
68. *Ibid.*, 91.
69. McEwan, *Nutshell*, 109.
70. *Ibid.*, 34.
71. *Ibid.*, 16.

72. Ibid., 33.
73. Ibid., 21. Later on, McEwan himself acknowledged during a talk that the unusual narrator is not even John's biological child, but the fruit of the incestuous relationship. According to the author, what arouses suspicion about the actual fatherhood is the fact that John is given £5,000 in order to keep him away from the house. However, there is no explicit allusion to this surprising declaration throughout the novel, apart from the fact that the baby is constantly referred to as undesired.
74. McEwan, *Nutshell*, 71.
75. Orlando Bird, 'Nutshell by John McEwan, Review – Lectures from the Womb', *The Telegraph*, 23 September 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/nutshell-by-ian-mcewan-review--lectures-from-the-womb/>.