

NOVEL SHAKESPEARES

Twentieth-century women novelists
and appropriation

Julie Sanders

Manchester University Press

Manchester and New York

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To Mike, Lynn, and the twins

I don't suppose this is how he imagined his readers.

If he imagined them at all.

KATE ATKINSON, *Human Croquet*

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INTRODUCTION

‘Mere sparks and clandestine glories’: Women writers, Shakespeare and appropriation

Tout texte se construit comme mosaïque de citations, tout texte est absorption et transformation d'un autre texte.

Julia Kristeva, *Semiotike*

Intertextuality is an essential condition of modern literature. Roland Barthes famously declared that ‘any text is an intertext’, engaged as written materials are in an ongoing process of absorbing and transforming the materials of preceding and contemporaneous cultures.¹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the particular set of intertexts provided by the dominant, enduring, transhistorical and cross-cultural signifier of ‘Shakespeare’ and his work has provoked considerable intellectual interest. Cultural appropriations of Shakespeare are fast becoming a genre in their own right. Numerous books have emerged that seek to anthologise or establish separate canons of ‘adaptations of Shakespeare’, across a range of genres and media.² Complementary literary critical studies increasingly focus on related questions about the cultural capital of ‘the Bard’.³ Nevertheless, the terms in which this area of interest is articulated – adaptation, appropriation, reworking, revision – remain a site of contestation and debate.

For Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier, editors of a recent collection of plays which, in their account, ‘adapt’ or provide ‘spinoffs’ from Shakespearean drama, the word ‘appropriation’ is potentially pejorative in its connotations: ‘This word suggests a hostile takeover, a seizure of authority over the original’ (2000: 3). While they acknowledge that conscious takeovers or aggressive campaigns of

this nature might appeal to 'contemporary sensibilities steeped in a politicized understanding of culture' (3), Fischlin and Fortier eschew the phrase in their own anthology, preferring the less negative 'adaptation'. One of their cited grounds for this rejection of the terms of appropriation is that the procedure can 'take place without altering the original itself – a sonnet quoted in full on a Valentine's card, for instance' (3). Admittedly, in this example the text of the sonnet is not altered, but the statement suppresses the fact that the understanding of it, and the reading that might be produced of it, is automatically affected by its new context. The Valentine's Day associations, the poem's presence as part of an artefact designed as a social gesture or gift and as part of the contemporary culture of commodification, all hold relevance for the way in which Shakespeare and the sonnet are being appropriated. Particular contexts – historical, social, political, and even critical – will prove crucial to the readings of Shakespearean appropriations offered in this study.

In a more positive engagement with the phrase, Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer have recently described acts of appropriation as 'creative and critical practice' (1999: 8). Their deployment of the term allows for a more productive dynamic than Fischlin and Fortier's antagonistic interpretation. While Desmet and Sawyer are undoubtedly interested in textual appropriations which are 'talking back to Shakespeare' (11), their more multivalent understanding of the term allows for celebratory as well as contestatory engagement, for conservative as well as radical harnessing of the Shakespearean intertexts. Other critics appear to empathise with this position. For Kate Chedgzoy, appropriation frequently entails a questioning or critique of the original textual authority (1995: 2); whereas for Marianne Novy, who focuses on a specifically feminine (and frequently feminist) enterprise, appropriations shade into the self-authenticating process of 're-vision' (1993).⁴

In dictionary definitions, while 'appropriation' can mean to annex or arrogate, to impound or seize, there are alternative interpretations which involve a less hostile sense or usage, a greater sense of setting something apart from its original purpose, of making things pertinent or 'appropriate' to a new or different set of structures, personal, political or cultural. As its title suggests, *Novel Shakespeares* is particularly interested in how contemporary

women novelists engage in this parallel process of textual takeover and adaptation – the rendering apposite or appropriate, as it were, of Shakespearean drama in a new context.

The gendered as well as generic focus of this book demands more detailed explanation. One of the driving questions behind this study was whether appropriation in a specific generic context, in this case that of the novel, could be read in gendered terms. Are particular politics at stake in women revising Shakespeare in the form of prose narrative? If so, are those politics expressed in specific patterns of narrative strategy and approach that might be traced across a series of appropriations by such writers? The study is, then, in part a search for genuine relations and kinship between authors and texts, at the levels of both content and form, in addition to the surface or sometimes subtextual Shakespearean connection.

In seeking to identify kinships in this way, however, the project is not a futile attempt at homogenisation. In establishing the context of each of the novels discussed here, in terms of both their relationship to Shakespeare and the historico-critical moment in which they were produced, I wish to stress the individual aesthetics of each author, while also identifying links and intersections. The recognition of the omnipresence of intertextuality does not diminish the creative process understood to be at play in these novels.

The focus on narrative is a product of the gendered emphasis of this study. Women's poetry, plays, short stories, and filmmaking have all referred to and adapted Shakespeare in some measure, but by far the largest contingent of female appropriators are to be found in the realm of prose narrative, not least in the current era. A central question to be posed, therefore, was why exactly the shift from the dramatic to the narrative form was being effected. What impact did that generic transition have on the treatment, and the implicit rewriting, of the Shakespearean intertext or intertexts? The multiplication of Shakespearean – and other – textual presences in these novels is, of course, simply a further indication of the polysemic aspect of the appropriation dynamic.

The choice of Shakespeare raises undoubted questions of canon formation and women writers' associations with what Fischlin and Fortier have aptly described as the 'broadly accepted group of works that is a consensual (though not uncontested) site of

foregrounded study within the academy' (2000: 6). By adapting Shakespeare, women writers self-consciously range themselves either within or alongside the academy in an often tense, occasionally directly resistant, relationship. By opting for an alternative genre to that of their male-authored dramatic precursors, they assert the innovative and creative aspect of their work.

Shakespeare is, of course, an obvious choice in seeking to debate the canon, since his corpus of works stands so clearly positioned in the hierarchy of value within it. Authors who allude to or quote Shakespeare have the greatest chance of their reading audience both registering the allusion and being able to see a writer's critical movement beyond the mere act of quotation or recitation. Writing of Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941), Gillian Beer observed: 'Woolf undoes the canon. Fragments from famous works wind in and out of people's consciousness, half-remembered, often mis-remembered, valued nonetheless. In memory, they are shards scattered or shared among a community' (Woolf, 1992: xix). *Between the Acts* famously deploys central phrases from Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* – 'orts, scraps, and fragments' – as a form of refrain throughout its theatrically self-referential sequences: 'The lines ... are persistently referred to, re-arranged, and riffled through the text' (Woolf, 1992: xix). Shakespeare's sceptical and scabrous play about the Trojan War and attendant societal collapse serves as an apposite analogue in the novel to the Second World War, which makes its own impact on Woolf's fictional village community in the shape of aeroplanes flying overhead, and that community's anxieties about impending fragmentation. But *Troilus and Cressida* is not the only Shakespearean text alluded to in the course of the book: *King Lear*, the sonnets, *Macbeth* and *The Tempest* all 'play their parts', according to Beer (Woolf, 1992: xix). 'The book', she says 'is not so much studded with quotation and allusion as combed through: sometimes mere sparks of reference remain, sometimes clandestine glories' (Woolf, 1992: xix).

In many ways, this book concerns itself with 'clandestine glories' of this kind. Woolf is one of a host of twentieth-century women writers who have alluded to, appropriated, and often revised Shakespeare in their work (Novy, 1990).⁵ *Novel Shakespeares* concentrates on late-twentieth-century examples of such writers, partly out of a desire to conduct a historicist analysis of a series of novels

produced across a clearly defined time period. Nevertheless, as will emerge in the course of the chapters that follow, the patterns of adaptation, purpose and strategy differ sometimes according to temporal context, but often according to national, ethnic or religious identities, and to the educative and institutional structures in which an individual author was raised or consciously situates (or situated) herself.

Particular plays occur and recur in the appropriations studied here with greater frequency than others. The special pertinence to women writers of plays such as *King Lear* or *The Tempest*, with their obvious themes of fathers and daughters and patriarchal rule, is therefore explored. In a related vein, the heightened relevance of romantic comedies, with their witty exploration of the pressures of heterosexual marital structures on same-sex friendships, and the societal pressures of gender expectations – most vividly realised in the cross-dressing scenes of a number of these playtexts – will be considered in detail. Elsewhere, however, it is interrelationships conducted at a linguistic, metaphorical and structural level that form the basis of the comparisons carried out between novels by women which appropriate Shakespeare. This introductory chapter will outline these relationships and recurring themes, which will then be explored in the context of both critical analysis and detailed close reading in the relevant chapters.

‘A moment of precarious, brilliant symmetry’; or,
an outline of the argument

Chapter 1 concentrates on Barbara Trapido’s 1994 novel *Juggling*, a vibrant example of a work which appropriates a whole range of Shakespearean texts and topics. In the process of a narrative which charts the growth to self-knowledge of Christina Angeletti, a journey which includes revelations about parentage, sexuality and intellectual power, the tropes and structures of Shakespearean drama are deployed as shaping intertexts. The romantic comedies *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, and *As You Like It*, among others, inform *Juggling*’s identifiable themes and leitmotifs: providing templates for the novel’s investment in overweening patriarchs, carefully plotted escapes into alternative worlds and

family structures, twins and twinnings, and the battle of the sexes. These plays also provide structural paradigms for Trapido's careful narrative ordering of events. Elsewhere, the late plays' themes of lost children and familial reconciliation can be identified. In Trapido's case, the influence of Structuralist criticism of Shakespeare proves tangible in her text of five acts and an epilogue. In one self-conscious gesture, *Juggling's* female protagonist produces her own essay on the topic of Shakespeare and genre as part of a university course: this text-within-a-text can – and does, of course – serve as a manual for Trapido's intricate novel.

Angela Carter's *Wise Children* (1992), a postmodern tapestry of parody, pastiche, intertextual allusion and deconstruction, is the focus of Chapter 2. In her text, Carter plays in an erudite and self-conscious way with the binaries of Shakespearean tragedy and comedy. She focuses on two linked theatrical families: the 'legitimate' tragedians (and Shakespeareans) the Hazards, and the music-hall twins Dora and Nora Chance. In the process, she creates a complex web of allusion to Shakespeare that attacks the sanctifying processes of bardolatry and the seizure of Shakespeare by high culture, while celebrating the popular cultural origins of his work and his plays' continued redefinitions (and, as a result, relevance) in the living media of performance, film and culture. As with Trapido, Carter's structural processes are of interest: both the self-conscious festive structuring of her narrative and her deployment of an 'unreliable narrator'. The latter is a figure or rhetorical strategy which emerges in several of the novels studied here. The special relevance of this technique for appropriations which seek to offer alternative points of view on canonical texts will therefore be explored in detail.

Both Trapido and Carter concern themselves with the convention of happy endings, for which Shakespearean comedy, with its marriages, dances and last-minute resolutions, provides such a pertinent example. Kate Atkinson, whose *Human Croquet* (1997) is the focus of Chapter 3, is also interested in the extent to which the achievement of closure is merely a temporal trick or illusion. The topic of time – one to which Shakespeare returned on numerous occasions throughout his career – provides a further linking category between the women writers being discussed. If Shakespearean drama undergoes metamorphosis into narrative (and it is no

coincidence that Atkinson shares Shakespeare's interest in this Ovidian theme), then narrative itself is under scrutiny in many of these texts. A linear, teleological history is being resisted in a majority of these novels. *Wise Children* moves in and out of present and past moments in a deliberately non-chronological order; *Human Croquet* goes even further by making time-travel a central topos. This is explored in more detail in Chapter 4, which compares *Human Croquet* to other time-travelling novels by women: Susan Cooper's children's book *King of Shadows* (1999), which recounts in ingenious ways a 1599 Globe production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; and Erica Jong's *Serenissima* (1987) which, as its name suggests, has *The Merchant of Venice* as a chief intertext. A linking fact between all three appropriations is that time travel initiates a direct encounter not only with the Shakespearean text but with the dramatist himself.

Human Croquet, whose primary intertexts are once again the romantic comedies, is narrated by sixteen-year-old Isobel Fairfax. Her narrative voice is, however, refracted at various points through that of the adult Isobel. She is, tellingly, a writer of historical fiction – which not only casts doubt on the verity or authenticity of the sixteen-year-old Isobel's claims, but makes evident to the reader the novel's heightened awareness of the constructs of history and time.

Isobel is yet another example of the 'unreliable narrator', as are Bradley Pearson and Charles Arrowby in Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* (1973) and *The Sea, The Sea* (1978) respectively. Chapter 5 considers Murdoch's career-long engagement with the Shakespearean model, examining the metatheatrical elements of her novels as well as the specific narrative encounters she made with plays from *Hamlet* (in *The Black Prince*), and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Othello* (in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970)) to *The Tempest* (in *The Sea, The Sea*). Murdoch's authorial interests in Platonic philosophy and surrealist theatre, as well as the moral value she accorded Shakespeare, are all seen to impact upon her complex and ambiguous acts of appropriation and allusion. Postmodern consciousness of form is also a particular aspect of her work, evidenced by the alternative endings provided by the multiple 'Postscripts by *Dramatis Personae*' appended to *The Black Prince*, and the shifting narratorial style and stance of Arrowby (an equivocal Prospero figure) in *The Sea, The Sea*.

The Tempest is one of the plays most commonly appropriated by women novelists. Connected concerns about voicing the silenced or oppressed female characters of the play (the onstage Miranda, but also the offstage absent presences of Claribel, Sycorax and Miranda's unnamed mother) clearly link such writers' textual ruminations – from Marina Warner's *Indigo* (1992) to Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987). But the different points of interest and investment found in this play by these writers is of equal importance when we are exploring their texts. While Murdoch's interest in *The Tempest*'s themes of art and magic can be more fruitfully read alongside other 1970s appropriations of the play such as John Fowles's enigmatic *The Magus* (revised in 1977), Marina Warner's *Indigo* (the focus of Chapter 6) is seen to be the product of a 1980s critical interest in postcolonial readings of Shakespeare's island drama. Warner's novel replaces a linear understanding of history and time with a cyclical and mythical one. A written text with a striking interest in the value of oral culture and the folk tradition of storytelling, *Indigo* is a feminist and politicised re-vision of the 1611 play. Significantly, the novel voices *The Tempest*'s infamous 'absent presence', the witch Sycorax, as a Liamuigan wise-woman in the seventeenth century. In the course of the narrative, Sycorax adopts Dulé (Caliban) and Ariel, who is re-created as female. This reclamatory version of the Shakespearean play's prehistory is juxtaposed throughout, and at times overlaps, with the life-story of Miranda Everard in the modern day. Miranda is struggling with her own family links to the island of Liamuiga, and to a confused postcolonial cultural inheritance that has parallels with Warner's own autobiography.

Chapter 7 provides a further postcolonial take on *The Tempest*, but this time figured through the generic conventions and strategies of film and detective fiction. Leslie Forbes's *Bombay Ice* (1998) is set in the sub-Jacobean world of the Bollywood film industry in modern-day India. The novel's own version of the unreliable narrator, Ros Benegal, goes to Mumbai in an effort to solve a family mystery, finding herself embroiled as a result in a world of serial killers and high-powered corruption. Forbes's multilayered text – which is interested in topics as diverse as film genres, chaos theory, gender and performance, Münchhausen's syndrome, and ancient myth – makes cultural capital of many of the themes and