

**2018 SAA Seminar: Shakespeare and the Modern Novel 1**  
**Leader: Douglas Trevor, University of Michigan (dtrevor@umich.edu)**

**Elena Sandin, University of Leon (Spain)**

**To be born or not to be born:  
Jan McEwan's *Nutshell* as a rewriting of *Hamlet***

The aim of my paper is to analyse Jan 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 focuses on the love triangle integrated by Claude [Claudius], Gertrude [Trudy] and King Hamlet [John Caircross] and narrates how the lovers plot the murder of the husband from the unusual perspective of a proto-Hamlet in the womb. The reason why McEwan particularly chose to reinterpret this play seems to be related to the themes it develops, since they are akin to the central issues of his narrative. Thus, despite the fact he is rewriting a Shakespearean work, the author remains faithful to his style and favourite topics. In McEwan's fiction, the function of the family is destructive rather than constructive conditioning the later development of the children, rendering them devoid of the affection needed. *Nutshell* also depicts his recurrent configuration of female mothers as authoritative and destructive especially for the natural growth of their offspring. Thus, this paper tackles issues related to family in McEwan's *Nutshell*, such as the destructive role of the mother or the lack of parental affection.

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**Rana Choi, University of Chicago**

**Why Do We Retell Old Stories?  
Shakespeare and the Modern Novel**

In major theorizations of "retellings" in the field of literary criticism, both Northrop Frye's understanding of archetypes and Erich Auerbach's study of *figura* subsume analogical plotlines or repeated situations and characters under a single historical meaning, so that retellings were tantamount to asserting notions of the immutability of human "nature," the illegitimacy of the modern age, or in any case some conception of history that emphasized continuity above all. Fredric Jameson's critique of Frye and (implicitly) of Auerbach centered on what he interpreted as the tendency of their attention to history to collapse temporal distance, and in effect, dehistoricizing the relation between texts. On the other hand, another theorist of literary history that takes up a middle ground between Frye and Jameson, W.K. Wimsatt, saw in literary form a preservation of poetic emotion as the only remnant of immediacy from an era whose social systems and form of life is no longer accessible to us.

In this study of Shakespeare and certain modern novelistic retellings, I examine what precisely each novel seeks to preserve from a Shakespeare play: a schematic plot structure, which shows

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how the exact plot and personalities can arise in a modern system? Or does the reference make one cognizant of our historical distance, preserving instead a sense of an independent system of values in its own right? Or perhaps, it imagines modern situations that preserve the same immediacy of emotion? The hope here is to articulate different philosophical outlooks regarding our present's relation to history, and eventually, evaluate them.

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**Chuck Conaway**

**Working through Trauma in Post-Apocalyptic Shakespeares**

My paper will focus on a number of post-apocalyptic science fiction novels that thematize concerns about the devastation of the planet's ecology, post-traumatic stress, the loss and recovery of memory, and the continued cultural importance of Shakespeare.

Drawing on James Berger's assumptions about post-apocalyptic worlds, I will explore the ways in which contemporary writers imagine Shakespeare's ability to function in a therapeutic manner in the wake of trauma induced by apocalyptic events. In *After the End: Representations of the Post-Apocalypse*, Berger argues that apocalyptic texts discuss not only the end of days, but what happens after the end: "the end," he writes, "is never the end" (5). "Something is left over, and that world after the world, the *post-apocalypse*, is usually the true object of the apocalyptic writer's concern" (Berger 6). This interest in post-apocalyptic times, Berger contends, can be read as a symptom of the fact that some sort of actual apocalypse has already occurred, and the writers of fictional apocalyptic texts, we should imagine, are trying to work through the trauma such an actual apocalypse has wrought (Berger 19).

The paper will examine, then, not only how Shakespeare serves in the fictional worlds of the novels to help characters work through trauma, but also how writers engage with him in order to show whether Shakespeare continues to matter in our own time when the Humanities are politically and culturally undervalued-especially when compared to professional programs and the STEM disciplines-and in futuristic worlds where capitalism and globalization bring us to the brink of environmental disaster or when science and technology utterly fail us or are used against us.

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**Natalie Eschenbaum**

**Modernizing Misogyny in Shakespeare's *Shrew***

An NPR review of *Vinegar Girl* (Hogarth 2016) states that Anne Tyler's modernization of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* is a "fizzy cocktail of a romantic comedy, far more sweet than acidic."<sup>1</sup> This paper considers how Tyler's novel adopts and adapts the critical debate concerning the play's misogyny. Social historians have helped to contextualize the shrew-taming plot, some claiming that Shakespeare's tale is similarly "romantic" and "sweet" when read in context. Students push back against such conclusions, however, arguing that teaching *Shrew* and its informing histories reinforces the patriarchy and risks normalizing misogyny. My paper is structured, in part, as a response to students' concerns, and is informed by girlhood and cultural studies. For instance, Deanne Williams shows that Shakespeare's girls are labeled "girls" when they are independent, willful, and resistant.<sup>2</sup> This labeling is a fact of Shakespeare's time that persists in parallel ways today. I specifically consider what it means to be a "Kate," who is a very particular type of girl. Marjorie Garber argues that culture creates character types—"Ophelias," "Lady Macbeths," or, in this case, "Kates"—that have little to do with Shakespeare's original characters, and everything to do with our current understanding of "Shakespeare."<sup>3</sup> I conclude that Tyler's adaptation is a balance of the sweet and the acidic; it shows how misogynistic values are sometimes romanticized, sometimes criticized, and frequently both simultaneously. In this contradictory way, it is very much like Shakespeare's original play.

1 McAlpin, Heller. "Fizzy 'Vinegar Girl' Tames Shrewishness to Sparkle." NPR. June 21, 2016.

2 Williams, Deanne. *Shakespeare and the Performance of Girlhood*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014.

3 Garber, Marjorie. *Shakespeare and Modern Culture*. New York: Pantheon, 2008.

**Greg Foran, Nazareth College**

**The "theatrical urge" in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres***

In print and during speaking engagements, novelist Jane Smiley has articulated the difference between drama and the modern novel in terms that favor the novel: against the drama's verbosity, the novel allows us access to what cannot be spoken; as opposed to a play's pretensions to universalism. In its presentation of characters, the novel mirrors the unique subjectivity of individuals by focalizing the plot through a specific point of view; and where a tragedy offers catharsis, leaving audience members stunned and bereft, the novel insists that life goes on. In *A Thousand Acres*, her prose fiction response to *King Lear*, Smiley offers not only challenges what she sees as the play's patriarchal assumptions, but struggles against the temptations of Shakespearean universalism and dramatic catharsis. This paper will examine how Smiley adapts some key features of the Shakespearean theater (especially the soliloquy and monologue) and radically alters or discards others (including moments of anagnorisis and catharsis) to improve upon her model. Yet despite Smiley's critique of the theater, *A Thousand Acres*, I argue, ultimately brokers an uneasy truce between drama and prose fiction, such that the novel incorporates the theater without fully assimilating it.

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**Graham Holderness**

**Shakespeare and Scandinavian Fiction**

This paper will present and analyse examples of the creative use of Shakespeare in some modern and contemporary Scandinavian fiction. Insofar as much contemporary Scandinavian fiction is naturally focused on the local realities of historic or contemporary Scandinavian society, and is dominated by genres such as the thriller and the murder mystery, it's not likely to find much use for Shakespeare. In fact this is true of the novel in general. Fortunately for us, and for the novel, the Modernist revolution of the early 20th century, especially in the hands of writers like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, opened up the novel form to fantasy, metafiction, the exploration of inner worlds, the crossing of genres, etc., in ways that allowed Shakespeare to penetrate inside the novel form. The writers discussed in this chapter all represent the legacy of that Modernist revolution.

**Examples:**

Karen Blixen, 'Tempests', *Anecdotes of Destiny* ( 1958).

Per Olov Enquist, *The Visit of the Royal Physician* (2000, 2002)

John Ajvide Lindqvist, *Let the Right One In* (2004 in Swedish, 2007 in English translation).

Hallgrímur Helgason, *101 Reykjavík* (Icelandic 1996, English 2002).

Jo Nesbo, *Macbeth* (Hogarth Shakespeare, 5 April 2018).

**Keith Jones**

**Almost Shakespeare-But Not Quite**

Taking Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* and Gary Schmidt's *Wednesday Wars* as test cases, this essay explores 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. The essay will also consider the mainstream appropriation of Shakespeare in Mandel and Schmidt. *The Three Fates* by Linda Le will be examined as a less-straightforward reworking of the material of a single Shakespeare play (*King Lear*). An examination of these three works in particular may prove useful in thinking through Jane Kidnie's suggestion that we should not measure adaptations or derivatives of Shakespearean plays against the text of the plays. In Kidnie's view, to do so is to ascribe too much authority to that text. Instead, any production-adaptation-derivative---should be looked at as "a dynamic process that evolves over time in response to the needs and sensibilities of its users" (2). An exploration of that idea

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may determine whether and to what degree Kidnie's ideas apply to the modern Shakespearean novel and what significance such an application might provide.

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**Kate Myers**

**Shakespeare and the Modern Novel**

While much critical attention has been paid to Angela Carter's intertextual appropriation of Shakespeare and her interrogation of the patriarchal ideology at work in his representations of familial strife, critics have focused on Carter's swansong novel *Wise Children*. Indeed, *Wise Children* self-consciously alludes to the Bard and announces its scrutiny and reversal of a father's claim on biological and Shakespeare's relatively recent claim on cultural legitimacy. It is easy to see why critics would focus on Shakespeare's influence in *Wise Children* because the novel blatantly borrows from Shakespeare's plays, as it traces the story of the illegitimate daughters of a nineteenth-century Shakespearean actor. However, the intertextual connection between Shakespeare and Carter's earlier novel *Nights at the Cirms* has gone largely unremarked. *Nights at the Cirms* more subtly returns to Shakespeare through his apparent and consistent interest in both time and space as it follows the exploits of the winged aerialist Sophie Fevvers. In this essay, I argue that *Nights at the Cirms* appears to appropriate, exploit, mirror, reverse, and ultimately shatter the methods Shakespeare uses to disrupt both space and time in the two plays. To this end, I draw on Elizabeth Grosz's short argument on the elusiveness and fragility of time in Deleuze, Kant, and Shakespeare as well as on John Spencer Hill's argument that the ever-changing ways Shakespeare explores the two abstractions compound the enigmatic entanglement of time and space across his corpus.

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**Laurie Osborne**

**Shakespearean Novel Writing:  
Trends and Blends**

My "paper" will raise and engage several questions that are now emerging in the encounter between Shakespeare and fiction writing, brought into sharp focus by the Hogarth Shakespeare novels. Prompted by the initial Hogarth novel, *The Gap of Time*, my first question is how we should understand current unexpected Shakespearean choices for novel adaptations. Could these choices characterize our current interactions with Shakespeare as much as Mary Cowden Clarke's mid 1800s choices characterize her Victorian context? My second, related question concerns Hogarth's new version of Cowden Clarke's serial Shakespearean publication. What can we understand from Hogarth's choice of all Shakespeare but all different novelists, each with a different style and set of literary credentials in contrast to Shakespearean series like Cowden Clarke's and current "series" that originate in single authors or persistent partnerships? My third question, prompted by several years of working on Shakespeare in YA fiction and other "genre" fiction, is what significance might we find in the concurrent publication of YA and Hogarth "literary" Shakespeare novels- Jeannette Winterson's *Winter's Tale* in *The Gap of Time* (October 2015) and in E. H. Johnston's *Exit, Pursued by a Bear* (March 2016); *Taming* in Ann Tyler's *Vinegar Girl* (June 2016) and Stephanie Kate Strohm's *The Taming of the Drew* (April 2016); and, most intriguing, Tracey Chevalier's *New Boy* (May 2017) and Sonia Belasco's *Speak of Me As I Am* (April 2017). The blurring of genres represented in these fictions is equally intriguing.

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Nota bene: More than three entries, but I am betting on some duplications. I would not normally include anything of mine, but that article might be useful.

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**Elizabeth Rivlin, Clemson University**

This essay focuses on Anne Tyler's *Vinegar Girl* (2016), published as a retelling of *The Taming of the Shrew* in the ongoing Hogarth Shakespeare Project. Tyler, according to the book reviewer Ron Charles, has "all the characters behave with considerably more humor and gentleness than in the Bard's version." Without saying so exactly, Charles suggests that Tyler is writing in the vein of romantic comedy, the most popular twentieth-century mode of interpreting *The Taming of the Shrew*, and one usually associated with female audiences. The novel's packaging reinforces the conventional gendering of romantic comedy as feminine. While romantic comedy does not usually signal literary fiction, the association with Shakespeare, coupled with Anne Tyler's own reputation as a prize-winning novelist (though her standing with critics has itself been ambivalent) guaranteed a serious reception for *Vinegar Girl*. There is thus an interestingly, even confusingly, mixed quality to the book's positioning within the critical and publishing fields. My premise in this essay is that the novel's generic and gendered qualities, as they manifest in Tyler's aesthetic strategies and as they are produced through the book's publishing and promotional apparatus, make the novel an example of contemporary middlebrow fiction. I use "middlebrow" here as an analytic category to gain purchase on fiction that seeks a conciliatory middle ground, often feminized, between seemingly opposed imperatives such as education and entertainment, aesthetics and commerce, and in this case, between "highbrow" (Shakespeare) and "lowbrow" (romantic comedy). Through reading Tyler's novel, the essay investigates what purposes Shakespeare serves in contemporary middlebrow fiction.

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**Katherine Scheil**

The Dark Lady evoked in Shakespeare's sonnets has been the subject of numerous speculations since the Victorian period. Several male writers and critics-George Bernard Shaw, Frank Harris, A.L. Rowse, and Anthony Burgess, for example-have undertaken extended imaginative explorations of this alternative woman. More recently, the Dark Lady 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 Aemilia* (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 intimately) personal life. My paper will look at 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.

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