

“The drops which fell from Shakespear’s Pen”: *Hamlet* in Contemporary Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Questions of gender, ethnicity and sexuality have all been raised by novelists intent on rewriting Shakespeare from the position of what have been seen as cultural margins. While discussions of such rewritings are ongoing, few concerted efforts have been made to trace a pattern in the treatment of Shakespearean allusion and adaptation at the hands of British and American writers of the literary mainstream. The present essay sets out to investigate the way in which three such writers —Ian McEwan, Graham Swift, and John Updike— employ allusion to/adaptations of *Hamlet* in their novels and what their respective stances reveal about their understanding of their role as canonical writers.

Shakespear, who (taught by none) did first impart
To Fletcher Wit, to labouring Johnson Art.
He Monarch-like gave those his subjects law,
And is that Nature which they paint and draw...
If they have since out-writ all other men,
‘Tis with the drops which fell from Shakespear’s Pen.
(John Dryden, Prologue to *The Tempest, or The Enchanted Isle*)

Some years ago, a poll conducted among around one hundred internationally acclaimed writers on behalf of the Norwegian Book Clubs named *Don Quixote* the “most meaningful book of all time” (Chrisafis, 2002). The picaresque tale drew 50 per cent

more votes than any other book,¹ thus eclipsing Shakespeare, Homer and Tolstoy among others. In fact, of those authors whose work is considered “most worthwhile”, Shakespeare (*Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*) is seen on a par with Franz Kafka (*The Trial*, *The Castle*, *The Complete Stories*), trailing behind Fyodor Dostoevsky (*Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Possessed*, *The Brothers Karamazov*). Despite these findings there can be no doubt that within the Anglophone world the Stratford Bard is still considered a “cultural father, source and guarantor of all that is finest in English literary history”. Much has been written about Shakespeare’s lasting appeal, the universality of his work and the multifariousness of his characters. Almost four-hundred years after his death his status appears undiminished and “[t]he security of his pre-eminence is assured by the diffusion of his works and myth throughout the English-speaking world, supported by institutions as various as the Hollywood film industry and the National Curriculum in British schools” (Chedzoy, 1994: 249f).

Most renowned among Shakespeare’s creations, “the most fascinating character, and the most inexhaustible” (Bradley, 1926: 357), is the eponymous tragic hero of *Hamlet*, and since the eighteenth century novelists on both sides of the Atlantic have drawn on this play as on a “Darwinian parent text” (Brooks-Davies, 1989: xiii), alluding more or less openly to it, revising, rewriting, reclaiming, transforming and appropriating it. That audiences and readers of Shakespeare’s plays see part of their age and their situation mirrored in them is no recent supposition. In fact, critics as early as Coleridge have stressed this aspect of Shakespeare’s work and see in it proof of its quality. As Hamilton elaborates:

The integrity of the individual in Shakespeare’s plays is not a closed definition of the inalienable qualities of a character, but an expression of the unrealized possibilities naturally open to him or her. It is on these possibilities that successive audiences seize, and out of them make their historically interested choices. (1983: 185)

The last few decades alone have produced a staggering number of such “historically interested” texts, especially by authors who “read Shakespeare against the grain” (Rozett, 1994: 76). The prevalent logic here seems to be that Shakespeare represents a cultural authority of such proportions that by challenging him writers challenge the very fabric of that culture for which he stands. In the case of *Hamlet*, a play that “reads like a textbook on the conjugal and patriarchal family” (Welsh, 2001: 3) and has its protagonist deliver many a misogynist diatribe, what is most often challenged is the way in which men dominate the action while women’s words, deeds and thoughts are seen as negligible, mere marginalia.² Writers challenging the “Copernican centrality” (States, 1992: 90) of *Hamlet* and the general dominance of men in the tragedy therefore have to find a new perspective from which to investigate events in Elsinore. This is what Lillie Wyman does in *Gertrude of Denmark: An Interpretive Romance* (1924), but it can also be seen in more recent and more radically feminist novels such as Iris Murdoch’s *The Black Prince* (1973), Fay Weldon’s *Remember Me* (1976) and Angela Carter’s *Wise Children* (1991) and in Margaret Atwood’s short piece “Gertrude Talks Back” (1992). While these writers pursue their feminist arguments to varying degrees

and while their works display many differences of plot, setting and intertextual references, what they all have in common is a shift in perspective, the introduction of a new subjectivity, namely that of their female protagonists. Before such a shift in perspective could be achieved or even contemplated, it must be assumed that these writers had a certain experience with the Shakespearean pre-text and although no generalisation can account for what is by definition a highly personal process, the following statement by Jane Smiley, author of *A Thousand Acres* (1991),³ may perhaps be seen as exemplary:

I became aware of how my reaction to the play did not conform to the standard interpretation of it. Harriet’s [her professor’s] was, simultaneously, a voice of authority, dispensing the conventional wisdom about the play, but also a woman’s voice, slightly recasting the whole argument. (qtd. in Nakadate, 1999: 6)

The process of shifting the focus away from *Hamlet*’s overwhelming subjectivity and towards the marginal female characters obviously represents some kind of addition to the play, and women writers are seen to “augment” it or to “fill in the gaps”, thereby hinting at what they perceive to be the “incompleteness of Shakespeare’s [text]” (Rozett, 1994: 70/72). But how do writers who have no occasion to read Shakespeare against the grain perceive *Hamlet* as a pre-text, how do they and how can they make use of it in their own fiction when they are firmly enthroned as “Shakespeare’s sons” in a position of “cultural centrality” (Chedgzoy, 1994: 265)? The most obvious assumption would be that they don’t. As the product of a culture that champions the canonical, they have no inherent desire to challenge the canon. And while, especially in recent decades, many novelists have come alive to the fact that Shakespeare’s works can be “hijacked” (Franssen, 1994: 139) for the most diverse purposes, no such hijacking should be deemed necessary by writers who find themselves in a position of cultural centrality.

In order to investigate the scope within which prominent mainstream writers have engaged with *Hamlet* as a pre-text, the present essay will analyse recent *Hamlet*-based novels by some of the most prominent practitioners of the writer’s craft on both sides of the Atlantic, two British, one American. In the last two decades, Graham Swift and Ian McEwan have each written a novel that refers more or less openly to *Hamlet*. Both novelists write within the literary mainstream, both were born into a traditionally British environment in the late 1940s and both are university educated. About their critical acclaim and their prominence in literary circles there can be no doubt.⁴ Swift’s *Ever After* (1992), like all of his novels, is a story of mourning (Poole, 1999: 153). Bill Unwin, onetime university lecturer and husband of the late Ruth Vaughan, Shakespearean actress, cannot come to terms with the death of his wife and attempts to end his own life in rather pathetic circumstances. Recovering from his attempted suicide, Bill contemplates the lives and deaths of other people close to him. First of all, there is his father Philip who shot himself while on duty in post-war Paris. Then there is his mother Sylvie who dies after a long illness aged seventy-eight. And finally there is

the American Sam Ellison, Bill's stepfather, found dead in a hotel room with a prostitute by his side.

Ever After is a veritable minefield of intertextual references to authors from Dante to Darwin and from Virgil to Tennyson. Most prominent, however, is the frequent recourse the narrator Bill Unwin takes to *Hamlet*, a play he was taught at school and which kindled his fascination with English literature. Bill identifies with the Prince of Denmark through most of his life and sees the mechanisms of the play reflected in his own life story: his mother's affair with Sam, the death of his father, and his stepfather's efforts to win his affection. In the course of the novel, however, the reader begins to realise that what is presented here is not proof of Bill's kinship with the tragic hero — *Ever After* is really concerned with dismantling Bill's "feverish fictions about playing Hamlet" (Poole, 1999: 157). Actual parallels to *Hamlet* remain tentative throughout *Ever After* and it is the narrator's insistence on them that leaves the strongest impression on the reader's mind. In fact, several passages openly contradict Bill's assertive "I am Bill Unwin (there, I declare myself!). I am Hamlet the Dane." (1993: 172). Bill himself says that he felt closer to his mother than to his father (1993: 26), he agrees that Sylvie and Sam observed "a decent interval" (1993: 66) of mourning before getting married, and finally admits that he "always liked [Sam]" (1993: 162). Bill expects his final meeting with Sam to confirm his suspicions: "He is here (Claudius at his prayers) to atone for his part in my father's death." (1993: 165). The encounter, however, finally shatters Bill's delusions when Sam tells him that it wasn't his affair with Sylvie that drove Bill's father to suicide:

"Your pa found out. Of course he found out. Were we *careful*? And there was this helluva bust-up between him and Sylvie, and in the middle of it Sylvie tells him —and afterwards she tells me she's told him— that you weren't —that you weren't his son. She tells him that to his face. And two days later your pa —who isn't your pa, who never was your pa— well, you know this, pa —he goes and shoots himself." (1993: 168)

This version of the story obviously puts an end to any ideas the reader might have entertained about Bill's kinship with Hamlet. Bill's idea that we can "look to actors and actresses . . . to show us how to act" (1993: 129) is thoroughly refuted by his realisation that his life is much more amorphous than that of any stage character.

It should have become obvious in the course of this short summary that Swift employs *Hamlet* as a contrast, a "means of comparison". As a "key or aid to understanding the story" (Jacobmeyer, 2002) of *Ever After*, the Shakespearean play has to be seen in terms of the widest possible consensus, the most orthodox interpretations because otherwise it could not be drawn on to clarify Bill Unwin's position. Any deviation from the canonical would cloud the issue. Swift, then, employs *Hamlet* as a template, a constant removed from current concerns and interpretive trends. By juxtaposing the tragedy of the Danish prince with the listless ruminations of a fifty-two-year-old widower, Swift comments on his character's fervent desire to discern a "structure of beginning, middle and ending" (Jacobmeyer, 2002) in life, a structure of

causality that, in the final analysis, he cannot find. Even tragedy, it seems, would be better than mere chaos, coincidence, meaninglessness.

In contrast to the female writers mentioned above and their transformations of *Hamlet*, Swift’s book declines to comment on the play. No augmentation of *Hamlet* is made, no new angle explored. Shakespeare is the law, the ideal, the blueprint according to which human beings exist and act. Although this is discovered to be false by Bill Unwin, no viable alternative is offered and a repentant Unwin is left longing for the days of his “forty years’ vicarious habitation of Elsinore as [his] second home” (1993: 13). Unwin is the unwitting twin of Hamlet in but one respect: he is the first-person narrator of the book and as such he is the subjective epicentre of all its goings-on.

Ian McEwan’s *Amsterdam* displays some obvious affinities to Swift’s *Ever After*. Both are concerned with mourning and remembrance and both feature characters in late middle age. In fact, whereas *Hamlet*-related texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries stressed the “bias towards youth in Shakespeare’s play” (Welsh, 2001: 87), the late twentieth century seems to revel in Hamlet figures that give an entirely different meaning to Gertrude’s “He’s fat and scant of breath” (*Hamlet* 5.2.264).⁵ In contrast to *Ever After*, however, there are few open references to *Hamlet* in *Amsterdam*, which is probably why the novel’s affinity with *Hamlet* has thus far gone largely unremarked (Stein, 2006: 300). McEwan opts instead for structural parallels by, among other things, dividing his book into five parts and portraying his heroes’ downfall in an almost classic curve of *hamartia*.

McEwan’s novel opens with the gathering of all the main characters at the funeral of Molly Lane. The reader encounters Foreign Secretary Julian Garmony, composer Clive Linley, newspaper editor Vernon Halliday and Molly’s widower George. All of these men did at one point have intimate relations with Molly and the scene is set for further rivalry when Vernon discovers that George is in possession of incriminating photographs of Julian. While Clive is concerned with the Millennial Symphony he has been commissioned to compose and frequently uses his artistic sensibility as an excuse for not intervening in the concerns of mere mortals, his friend Vernon spends much of the novel chasing after the photos of Julian, convinced that it is his responsibility to publish them and thus “to shape the destiny of his country” (1998: 101) and to persevere against all that is “financially, morally and sexually corrupt” (1998: 101). In the pursuit of their goals, both Clive, the impassive artist and Vernon, the self-appointed “scourge and minister” (*Hamlet* 3.4.175) suffer “serious failure[s] of . . . judgement” (1998: 128) in the face of which they are reminded of an understanding they came to after witnessing Molly’s debilitating illness. Clive called on Vernon as his “oldest friend” to “help [him] die” (1998: 49) should he ever face mental or physical deterioration. Vernon agreed: “Yes, on one condition only: that you’d do the same for me” (1998: 57). In dramaturgical terms, the fifth part of *Amsterdam* is devoted to the depiction of the catastrophe which results from this pact (Stein, 2006: 300). Clive and Vernon both consider the other’s “failure of judgement” a sign of the onset of senility and, spurred on by selfish motives and a developing “taste for revenge” (1998: 149) they contrive to poison each other:

Clive and Vernon engineer a meeting with one another . . . which forms a denouement of drug-induced hallucinatory events in which the two are seen to briefly lose their minds in death (in a comic distortion of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*). Each is the victim of the other's poisoning plot. (Strongman, 2002: 249)

The double murder is of course a convention of revenge tragedy, and apart from the themes of madness, friendship, dreams, poison and revenge, there is many a hint at the most famous specimen of this genre. As in *Ever After*, though, it is the discrepancies between *Amsterdam* and its pre-text that create meaning, most marked among them that of the tragic flaw of the hero or, in the case of *Amsterdam*, heroes. What in *Hamlet* is used to depict "the complex implications of a fundamental ethical crisis" (Stein, 2006: 301), a painstaking investigation of moral obligations, is presented in *Amsterdam* as the hypocrisy of self-appointed moralists in politics, journalism and the arts: "Each personality is shown to be ironically and pathetically self-centred and riddled with flaws of character and misjudgements of event and circumstance" (Strongman, 2002: 247). No sympathy with the characters can develop because their dilemmas are no dilemmas at all: the necessity to act in a certain way is not real, it is merely perceived by these characters blinded by ambition and opportunism. Horatio's summary of events in Elsinore may serve to illustrate this:

And let me speak to th'yet unknowing world
How these things came about. So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fallen on th'inventors' heads. (5.2.358-364)

What Horatio states here not only summarises *Hamlet*, it is also a summary of *Amsterdam*, a novel that has to be read as "a fictionalised farcical rewriting" (Stein, 2006: 301) of the Bard's tragedy: everything found in Horatio's tragic list has its farcical equivalent in McEwan's text. As in *Ever After*, *Hamlet* is the text *against* which *Amsterdam* must be read to understand the comments it makes on our day and age. David Malcolm infers that if the characters in *Amsterdam* "are, in a sense, hollow men, then, the novel suggests, so is their whole generation" (2002: 193). And what better way to present this than by contrasting their modern-day positions with those of the principal cast of *Hamlet*? As in *Ever After*, this technique can work only if *Hamlet* is seen as unalterable, forever fixed by the laws of canonicity, and McEwan's historically interested reading of the play does not clash with orthodox interpretations.

As the discussion of these two novels has shown, there is little tendency among these exponents of the literary and cultural mainstream in Britain to challenge *Hamlet* or to read it "against the grain". Instead, the authors of *Amsterdam* and *Ever After* employ *Hamlet* the better to explicate our modern lives and the flaws they detect

therein. At their hands, the play is used as a point of reference and as such it is championed over the muddled and sordid tales of our own age. They are privileged to write without the need to *re-write* since they have no apparent issues with the literary tradition they grew up in. *Hamlet* is of course a seminal text within that tradition and it is difficult to imagine an established white middle-class male heterosexual writer of British provenance in any way rewriting or appropriating it.⁶

If British writers of the cultural and literary mainstream have proved resistant to challenging Shakespeare on his home ground, it might be assumed that the same goes for their American colleagues. There is, however, at least one big name in American literature who has done his utmost to manipulate his readers’ views of the Shakespearean classic, to influence the way in which we think about the world of *Hamlet* instead of using *Hamlet* to influence the way we see our own. But then, the tragedy is concerned with the inner life of a family, a subject John Updike over the course of his long career has made his own. In *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000) Updike embarks on a transformation of a special kind: he chooses to write a prequel to *Hamlet* by chronicling the story of Gertrude, King Hamlet and Claudius,⁷ beginning with Gertrude’s betrothal to the valiant warrior and vassal to her father. Young Gertrude is given away in marriage to Hamlet and only reluctantly consents to this step. The reader is left in no doubt about Gertrude’s views on the subject of political marriages when early on in the novel she says that “no woman wants to be a mere piece of furniture, to be bartered for and then sat upon” (2001: 5).

At first their marriage seems to work out and it looks indeed as if love might “inevitably follow upon cohabitation and the many shared incidents of married life” (2001: 7). As time goes on, however, Hamlet grows negligent of Gertrude and she is drawn more and more to his younger brother who to her seems to represent a freedom she never had: Claudius has travelled all over Europe and seen many an adventure. In fact, Gertrude sees in Claudius the perfect match, “her redeemer from lawful life’s deadening emptiness, her own self turned inside out and given a man’s bearish, boyish form” (2001: 130). Gertrude and Claudius finally embark on their affair that no one except a few select servants and the counsellor Polonius knows about. There is no talk between the Queen and her lover of deposing Old Hamlet and it transpires that Gertrude enjoys “her quickened duplicitous state”, feeling “the thrill of deception between her legs, where two men contended, one the world’s anointed and the other her own anointed” (2001: 131). Only when their love is discovered and Claudius has to fear for his life and that of Gertrude does he undertake to kill his brother.

While the poisoning referred to in the dumb show (*Hamlet* 3.2.121), the play within the play (3.2.236-237) and in the words of the Ghost (1.5.61-73) renders the impression of a premeditated crime, Updike’s version of the story sees Claudius acting on the spur of the moment and, it might be maintained, in self-defence. The final part of *Gertrude and Claudius* overlaps with Act I of *Hamlet* and here finally we encounter “the most-true-to-life of Shakespeare’s creations” (Wiggins, 1994: 209) in the flesh. But it is not the gloomy prince we discern in the form of Hamlet, rather a sulking child who, as the

reader well knows, will not keep the promise he makes to Claudius in the one line he is given to say in Updike's novel: "I shall in all my best obey you" (2001: 210).

Of course the form of a prequel or prologue represents a very definite type of augmentation even if it is subject to certain restrictions such as that of a predetermined outcome. Updike goes further than the mere technical inevitabilities and establishes an elaborate framework within which his story can unfold, and this framework serves to undermine the authority of both Shakespeare the playwright and Hamlet the prince. First and most noticeable of all there is the matter of the characters' names. By calling Gertrude, Old Hamlet and Claudius by the names given to them in the *Historia Danica* of Saxo Grammaticus (part one of *Gertrude and Claudius*), in Belleforest's *Histoires tragiques* (part two) and by the Bard himself (part three), Updike calls to mind the fact that the *Hamlet* we know "is a transformation of an indeterminate number of prior texts" (Rozett, 1994: 67). If Shakespeare is not the sole creator of the *Hamlet* story, there is nothing to say that his version of it is the definitive one (Hopkin: 2001). The Bard is merely a link in a chain Updike takes up and continues. Updike certainly fulfils our expectations of a prequel by foreshadowing the tragedy that is to come, as when Polonius speaks to Gertrude about the obstinacy of her son: "Your husband sets the boy, it may be, too stern an example. But I have no doubt, when clear duty is set before him, that Amleth, though turning it this way and that in his mind, will end in doing the needful" (2001: 42).

But while such foreshadowings are expected and to some extent even unavoidable in a text "so supercharged with potency that a simple phrase —'out of joint', say, or 'you protest too much'— or sometimes a single word —'arras' or 'angel'— can trigger the tinkle of associations" (Mars-Jones, 2000), what does surprise is the redistribution of sympathy within Updike's novel. As in the *Hamlet* rewritings by female authors mentioned above, the brooding prince is no longer the focus of the story. Referred to as "little Hamlet" (Updike, 2001: 164) instead of Shakespeare's "young Hamlet", we are encouraged not to take him or his malady too seriously since its true scope is not apparent to those on whom the focus rests, his mother and uncle.

Any affinity *Gertrude and Claudius* may have with openly feminist renderings of the *Hamlet* story are of course put into question by the fact that in his previous books Updike hardly displays what can be called a feminist attitude and by passages in *Gertrude and Claudius* such as this: "Had he bid her lie down in pigshit she would have squeezed her buttocks together in the clench and rejoiced to be thus befouled" (2001: 130). If Updike does not intend to stand up for Gertrude's right to be heard as a woman, why does he try to redress the balance and give us someone else's side of the story? Part of this may be gauged in the way Updike creates a few contradictions to *Hamlet* as in the following speech, delivered by Polonius: "The Church has done ill, I sometimes believe, in letting up, in these lax times, its imprecations against this unholy travesty of theatrical performance, which, aping Creation, distracts men from last things and from first things as well" (2001: 42). This is quite an unexpected judgement from a man who, in *Hamlet*, announces the arrival of the players with open enthusiasm (2.2.363-8) and then recounts the days when he "did enact Julius Caesar" and "was killed i'th'Capitol"

(3.2.91). This allusion to the performance of another of Shakespeare’s plays is of course well known and in contradicting it, Updike does more than refusing to be ruled by Shakespeare’s text. In fact, it is a dig at the dramatic genre, delivered by one of the supreme proponents of the American novel. After all, if Shakespeare’s pun can only work in the playhouse, Polonius’s diatribe in *Gertrude and Claudius* fits the mood of the novel perfectly, filling in the historical backdrop of Christianisation before which Updike’s novel has to be read. “To rewrite *Hamlet* in the age of the novel almost inevitably entails novelistic strategies” (Rozett, 1994: 94), and nowhere is this made as plain as in *Gertrude and Claudius*.

Ever since the eighteenth century, the novel has been the genre of open discourse, allowing for the psychologically convincing representation of several characters’ viewpoints and thus portraying a multifaceted realism beyond the reach of dramatic representation. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* “there is no scenic deviation from the drama of Hamlet”. The audience is given one man’s thoughts, Hamlet’s soliloquies, and is nudged along by means of asides. Everything else is dialogue, dialogue concerned with one man: “When Laertes and Ophelia talk, they talk of Hamlet; when Polonius and Ophelia talk—or Polonius, Claudius and Gertrude—they talk of Hamlet” (States, 1992: 90). Updike augments *Hamlet* in the spirit of the novel, the spirit of open discourse where everyone can have their say.

The generic questions Updike raises call to mind a short story by Anthony Burgess who, on account of his Irish working-class heritage and his education at Manchester University (and not Oxbridge), never saw himself as part of the English literary establishment. He wrote several fictional Shakespeare biographies,⁸ and his “A Meeting in Valladolid” tells the story of a fictional encounter between the Bard and Cervantes, author of *Don Quixote*. Since they are ignorant of each other’s work, Don Manuel, Shakespeare’s guide and translator, intervenes: “I have seen your plays. I have read his book. You will forgive me if I say that I know where the superiority lies. You lack wholeness. He has seen more of life. He has the power to render both the flesh and the spirit at one and the same time . . .” (Burgess, 1990: 14). Refusing to see the superiority of Cervantes’s story (or indeed the genre he writes in), Shakespeare later on questions Don Manuel about *Don Quixote*:

‘Can it be made into a play?’

‘It cannot. Its length is its virtue. You cannot encompass so long a journey in your two hours’ traffic.’

Will howled quietly. ‘It is of the nature of a play to be short. Is there poetry in it?’

‘He tells his tale plainly. He has not your gift of sharp and vivid compression. But he needs it not.’ (Burgess, 1990: 15)

Whereupon Will decides to stage a revised *Hamlet* that will show all the world how much his art can encompass. This new *Hamlet* envisioned by Burgess includes guest appearances by Hotspur, Falstaff, and Mistress Quickly, a Danish invasion of England, the pretended death of Claudius and the succession of Hamlet to the throne in spite of Fortinbras and his claims to it. As Will comments: “You shall have a play of some

seven hours' running time, and if they do not like it they may send us home" (Burgess, 1990: 16). The misconception here is of course grounded in the idea that length equals depth. *Gertrude and Claudius*, however, is not a long novel and still engages in a meaningful dialogue with its famous precursor.

In contrast to Updike's book, writers of the more canonical British tradition such as Swift and McEwan appear to heed the "law" laid down "Monarch-like" by its greatest proponent—not necessarily out of any refusal to acknowledge other schools of thought but first and foremost because it serves their purposes. *Ever After* and *Amsterdam* are set in contemporary Britain and specifically concerned with our time. Swift and McEwan portray modern life and aim to contrast it with dilemmas and moral imperatives familiar to their readers. Whereas Updike finds his niche for a historically interested transformation of *Hamlet* by revising the play qua novelist, Swift and McEwan have no occasion to look for such a niche. The unaltered Shakespearean *Hamlet* provides sufficient material to serve their narrative purposes. Any discussion of whether this approach is more traditional in spirit than the revisions undertaken by other writers is rendered futile by the simple fact that, as Updike points out, Shakespeare himself used the stories of Saxo Grammaticus and Belleforest for his own purposes, even transforming them from narrative accounts into a play. Thus, the revisionist writers can claim to be acting within the literary tradition as much as those who make unadulterated use of the drops which fell from Shakespeare's pen.

As for the endeavours of this essay, it is of course conspicuous that there is a division between McEwan and Swift on the one hand and Updike on the other, and it does indeed appear as if the two British authors were less eager to revise and rewrite Shakespeare. But since Updike develops his transformation based on his profession and not his nationality, and since a survey of three novels can hardly be expected to spawn a watertight and universally applicable typology, the idea that American writers in general tend to take more revisionist stances than their British colleagues remains little more than that. As far as the future of *Hamlet*-based novels is concerned, each reader will have his or her preferences just as each writer will treat the Shakespearean pre-text in accordance with his or her own ends. And we can rest assured in the knowledge that the plurality resulting from this is part of the time-honoured tradition of *Hamlet* as an endlessly evolving text. Or as Salman Rushdie writes in a plea for the acceptance of conflicting *Hamlet* stories in his "Yorick" when the narrator justifies his unorthodox telling of the jester's story: "I offer no defence, but this: that these matters are shrouded in antiquity, and there's no certainty in them; so let the versions coexist, for there's no need to choose" (1994: 81).

Notes

1. The poll was based on a definition of the term "book" which includes novels, plays, collections of stories, volumes of poetry, and epic poems.

2. Other Shakespearean works such as *Othello* or *The Tempest* obviously offer themselves to very different kinds of re-visions, but I would contend that the process of "reading against

the grain” is broadly speaking analogous to that experienced by the female writers discussed here.

3. *A Thousand Acres* is of course a rewriting of the *Lear* story, not of *Hamlet*, but in it Smiley employs a shift in perspective similar to that described above.

4. Swift won the Booker Prize for *Last Orders* in 1996, McEwan for *Amsterdam* in 1998.

5. A prominent American example of this is Alan Isler’s *The Prince of West End Avenue* (1994), which is set in a Jewish New York retirement home.

6. Tom Stoppard and his radical transformations of *Hamlet* such as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) and *Dogg’s Hamlet, Cahoot’s Macbeth* (1979) may seem to contradict this assertion. Having worked mainly as a playwright, Stoppard cannot be considered within the scope of this essay. For a discussion of his relation to Shakespearean pre-texts see Jill L. Levenson (2001).

7. As will be discussed later on in this essay, the characters’ names in *Gertrude and Claudius* are not necessarily the same as those they are known by in *Hamlet*. For the sake of brevity and lucidity they are referred to here by the names Shakespeare gave them.

8. *Nothing Like the Sun: A Story of Shakespeare’s Love-Life* (1964), *Shakespeare* (1970) and *Enderby’s Dark Lady* (1984).

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