

Shakespearean Gothic
Christy Desmet and Anne Williams (eds.)

Katherine Bowers, University of British Columbia

Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009

ISBN: 9780708320921

Shakespearean Gothic, a collection of scholarly essays edited by Christy Desmet and Anne Williams, explores in detail the obvious and yet paradoxical phenomenon of overlap between Shakespeare and Gothic fiction. In their introduction, Desmet and Williams describe this relationship metaphorically, after Jung's theory of the ego: '[Shakespeare] materialized as the father of English literature in the eighteenth-century imagination' (2), 'was admired for the mirror he held up to nature' (5), and became 'a lamp that shed its unique radiance on mankind' illuminating its modern self (5), while the Gothic emerged from this glowing figure's shadow. Beginning with Horace Walpole, those enamored with the new Gothic fiction 'justified [its] sensational material, "monstrosities" of all kinds' in the brutality (2), violence, and transgression found in Shakespeare's plays, which had been rediscovered in the eighteenth century and stirred the public's imagination with their often dark plots and transgressive themes. Thus, this collection begins with the premise that Shakespeare and the Gothic are both inextricably linked; 'a complete portrait of Shakespeare must include his Gothic "shadow"' (2) and its inverse, 'in order to read the Gothic clearly, we should contemplate its Shakespearean origin' (2). The volume's ten essays are divided into three sections: Gothic 'appropriations' of Shakespeare, Gothic rewritings of Shakespeare, and Shakespeare as Gothic writer.

Part I examines the way that writers appropriated Shakespeare for their own literary ends. Anne Williams visits Walpole's most Shakespearean works – the novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the history *Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of King Richard III* (1768), and the blank-verse tragedy *The Mysterious Mother* (1768) – and argues that the writer's incorporation of Shakespearean characters and plot elements were a means of confronting and working through the anxious legacy of his own possible illegitimacy. Her gothic 'reading' of Walpole's estate Strawberry Hill is particularly interesting in light of his writing. Rictor Norton's essay on Ann

Radcliffe's Shakespearean epigraphs and quotations presents convincing evidence against the prevailing theory that her use of Shakespeare was merely for the sake of embellishment. Norton argues that Radcliffe's own much-lauded effects of narrative, sensation, and affect were the product of her reading of Shakespeare. Finishing the section, Jeffrey Kahan's piece – atmospherically titled 'The Curse of Shakespeare' – examines William Henry Ireland's famous Shakespeare forgeries in the context of his later Gothic fiction, reading these works as apologetic and even an attempt at literary rehabilitation.

Part II moves from appropriation to revision of Shakespeare, exploring the way that Gothic writers actively rewrote Shakespeare's plays and characters. In "'Shakespearean Shadows': Parodic Hauntings of Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*,' Marjean D. Purinton and Marliss C. Desens demonstrate how Shakespeare's plots serve as a locus for the Gothic parody in these two 'performative Gothic' works, enabling the dramatization of contemporaneous social anxieties related to gender roles and power structures. The fresh reading of *Northanger Abbey* provides illuminating insight into the characters of Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney. Carolyn A. Weber's essay takes on the incest at the center of Mary Shelley's 1819 novel *Matilda* and brilliantly locates its origin in the context of Shelley's rereading of *King Lear*, especially the complicated relationship between King Lear and his daughter Cordelia, during a period of particular grief after the death of Shelley's son, William. Sexual violence and murder come to the fore in Yael Shapira's reading of *Romeo and Juliet* through the prism of Matthew Lewis's reconception of the star-crossed lovers in *The Monk* (1796). Rounding out the section, Diane Long Hoeveler returns to *King Lear*, considering Amelia Opie's novel *Father and Daughter* (1801) as a rewriting of the play. Hoeveler explores the legacy of this plot within the context of early nineteenth-century English national character, particularly in light of George III's illness, through contemporaneous performances of the play.

Performance ends Part II, and thematically connects with Part III, in which the essays consider Shakespeare's plays as Gothic texts. The section begins with a thematic analysis: Jessica Walker's reading of *Richard III* reveals the play's latent Gothicism in its anxious probing of the boundary 'between (barbaric) past and (civilized) present' (9). The final two chapters dwell on interpretation. Late nineteenth-century actress Ellen Terry was famous for her portrayal of Ophelia, and was famously cast in Bram Stoker's late Gothic theatricals. Christy Desmet's chapter explores the relationship between Terry's Ophelia and Stoker's blurring of living and

undead in *Dracula*. The final chapter looks at Gothic transposition of Shakespeare as Susan Allen Ford examines the way the Gothic informed the creation of Kenneth Branagh's film *Hamlet* (1996) and the additional layer of meaning excavated in Shakespeare's text through this grafting. In the Afterword, Frederick Burwick sets off on a new path, exploring the Boydell Gallery (famous for its collection of Shakespeare lithographs in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century London) and demonstrating that Shakespeare, too, was being adapted for the new Gothic taste of the times.

Shakespearean Gothic is a pleasure to read, with some insightful new readings of works, and thoughtful treatment of its subject. The volume touches on large topics such as performance, gender, and social anxieties, but the essays still leave considerable room for more work. Indeed, another recent collection, *Gothic Shakespeares* (Routledge 2008) edited by John Drakakis and Dale Townshend, takes the same topic, and even includes essays on some of the same writers (Radcliffe, Walpole), but the two works have entirely different coverage. One complaint about the volume is that the indexing is done somewhat erratically, with a work sometimes filed under its author's name and sometimes under its own title, for example. However, this quibble should not mar the whole. *Shakespearean Gothic* is a rich collection that succeeds in its aim of beginning to elucidate some aspects of the complex relationship between Shakespeare and the Gothic.