

Robin O. Warren, University of Georgia

Sanders, Julie. *Novel Shakespeares: Twentieth-Century*

*Women Novelists and Appropriation*. Manchester: Manchester

University Press, 2001. xi + 258 pp. ISBN 0-7190-5816-3.

With her study of contemporary fiction by women that appropriates and adapts Shakespeare, Julie Sanders has contributed a probing text to the growing field of similar investigations, including *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, edited by Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier (2000), *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, edited by Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (1999), and Marianne Novy's *Transforming Shakespeare* (1999). In ten chapters, Sanders sets out to show how thirteen late twentieth-century "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" (Sanders 2001, 3). Specifically, Sanders looks at the generic context and asks, "what politics are at stake when women revise Shakespeare in the form of a prose narrative?" (3). Finding the answer to this question leads Sanders to examine the complicating role that intertextuality and twentieth-century literary criticism play in the novels that she explores. Through intertexts and the lens of literary theory, Sanders asserts that women writers critique, revise, and rethink Shakespeare to question the silencing and marginalization of female characters in his plays.

In her first three chapters, Sanders focuses on novels that appropriate Shakespeare's romantic comedies by incorporating their motifs and structural patterns. Sanders makes much of investigating themes of romantic love, sexual inversion and disguise, questions of identity, motifs of twinning, absent parents, and lost children. Since she addresses isolated moments of allusion, rather than sustained and congruent plotlines, however, Sanders's analysis in these early chapters lacks a depth that it gains in later chapters when she examines novels that parallel the plays they appropriate. Chapter 1, "Not Quite Shakespeare," concentrates on Barbara Trapido's *Juggling* (1994), a bildungsroman that traces protagonist Christina Angeletti's struggles to find her identity. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* acts as one important shaping intertext for the novel; as a child, Christina's step-father Joe often read to her from the play, and the troubled relationship between Titania and Oberon become emblematic in her mind of the difficult relationship that her parents share. Sanders asserts that Oberon becomes the "embodiment of patriarchal control" that stains Joe by association (Sanders 2003, 16). Christina escapes Joe when she goes to boarding school and

gains some autonomy in this new and redeeming world. She will later return to the school as the wife of a teacher. Observing this movement, Sanders sees the novel as being informed by both feminist and Structuralist theory.

In Chapter 2, "We Dearly Love the Bard, Sir: Angela Carter's Shakespeare," Sanders looks at Carter's novel *Wise Children* (1992). The novel is narrated by Dora Chance, who made her career in music hall entertainment, along with her twin sister, Nora. The book contrasts their experiences with those of their father, a high-brow Shakespearean actor, Melchior Hazard. Sanders calls the novel "a postmodern tapestry of parody, pastiche, intertextual allusion, and deconstruction" and asserts that the book questions the strict divide between high and low culture (Sanders 2001, 6). The setting underscores this division, for the book takes place on what Dora calls "the bastard side of the Thames" (41). As Sanders explains, Dora's reference locates the novel to the south of London in the area that sixteenth-century authorities termed the Liberties and where The Globe, the Hope, The Rose, and The Swan, all theaters for which Shakespeare wrote, were located. Dora's reference carries further meaning, though, for she and her sister are actually the illegitimate daughters of Melchior Hazard. While Carter's novel seeks to show the appeal of Shakespeare to a broad spectrum through its diffusion of class, it also incorporates a wide range of Shakespearean allusions, both comic and tragic: from *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night* for the motif of twins, *Hamlet* for the patterning of Dora and Nora's god-daughter's near-madness, *Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the description of two over-the-top productions that Dora and Nora recall from their past, and mix-ups of the sort that derive from the romantic comedies. Sanders also notes that the novel uses the carnivalesque by including several festive occasions that compare to rituals appearing in Shakespearean drama.

Chapter 3, "Kate Atkinson in the House of Arden," treats Atkinson's *Human Croquet* (1997), a mystery following young Isobel Fairfax's attempts to discover who murdered her mother. The novel begins on Isobel's sixteenth birthday; as the day unfolds, the young girl experiences brief time warps. She hurtles into the distant past, where she gradually learns the truth about her strange family and her mother, whose disappearance into the nearby forest of Arden is at the heart of the novel. Sanders places great emphasis on this intertextual allusion, "a knowing reference to the forest of *As You Like It*" (Sanders 2001, 67). She also asserts that the presence of the carnivalesque at the beginning allows Atkinson to engage with the patterns and rituals of Shakespearean comedy.

In Chapter 4, "'We Might as Well Be Time Traveling': Shakespeare, Narrative, and the Mobius Strip," Sanders turns her attention to Erica Jong's *Serenissima* (1987) (retitled *Shylock's Daughter* in its U.S. reprint). Jessica Pruitt, a former Hollywood starlet, now approaching middle-age, narrates this novel. She has traveled to Venice for a film festival, which she will judge, but

she has also come to film a cinematic appropriation of *The Merchant of Venice*. At first, this film will be named *Serenissima*, but eventually gets renamed *Shylock's Daughter*. As Sanders points out, this appropriation stands as "a curious parallel with Jong's own dual-titled novel" (Sanders 2001, 86). Pruitt loses a fortune on her venture, and she decides to make up for her financial losses by moving to London and founding a New Globe on Southwark's Bankside. Sanders takes Trapido to task for creating in Pruitt a rapacious Jewish stereotype more akin to Shylock than her play-namesake, Jessica, but other readers could see in Jessica's actions a refreshing autonomy. As Sanders's chapter title reveals, she also focuses on a time-warp that occurs in Jong's novel, but this event — Jessica travels back to the sixteenth-century and falls in love with Shakespeare at one point — only represents one relatively insignificant occurrence in the book and seems an inappropriate focus for Sanders's chapter title.

In Chapter 5, "Iris Murdoch and the Theatrical Scene," Sanders turns her attention to two novels by Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince* (1973) and *The Sea, The Sea* (1978). *The Black Prince* continues her focus on tragedy, as the novel appropriates *Hamlet*. The plot centers on Bradley Pearson, a retired tax inspector and writer, who has an obsession with a young woman, Julian, the daughter of his best friend and rival writer, Arnold Baffin. Pearson's passion for Julian reaches its height when she plays Hamlet in drag. As Sanders asserts, "Julian's androgynous nomenclature and appearance lend a quasi-homoerotic frisson" to their encounter and implies that Pearson harbors latent homosexual desires (Sanders 2001, 115). She goes on to note that "as in Shakespeare's play, appearance and reality are at the heart of this oblique novel" (116). While the play begins with an actual murder, the novel ends with one: Baffin's discontented wife Rachel kills him and frames Pearson, thereby executing revenge for her husband's failed love and their friend's involvement with her daughter.

In the second half of this chapter, Sanders looks at Murdoch's novel, *The Sea, The Sea*, which appropriates *The Tempest*, another play that incorporates revenge as a primary theme. Like *The Black Prince*, this book features a retired protagonist, Charles Arrowby, a theater director who has moved to a remote island community, where he meets a former lover, Mary Hartley Smith, and subsequently subjects her and her family to a series of invasions and abductions in an attempt to win her back. Charles parallels Prospero, and Sanders contends that Murdoch draws on literary readings of him as "a tyrant-patriarch" popular in the 1960s and 1970s (Sanders 2001, 124). Whereas Sanders provides searching analysis of the women and their roles in *The Black Prince*, she never returns to Mary Hartley Smith in *The Sea, The Sea* after her first mention. This absence seems odd given Sanders's commitment to showing how the appropriations that she studies address the silencing of

women. Mary Hartley Smith serves an important role in the novel that Sanders fails to recognize: Smith shows the aged and egotistical Charles that she has not lived her life regretting his loss.

With Chapters 6, 7, and 8, Sanders continues to discuss narrative appropriations of *The Tempest*, but with these novels, she does not fail to consider the silenced and oppressed characters of the dramatic romance that find their way to the forefront of the plot. Indeed, Sanders's analysis takes a stronger turn at this juncture in the book, for the novels that she has chosen to talk about include more concrete parallels to their Shakespearean counterparts. Chapter 6, "' Finding a Different Sentence': Marina Warner's *Indigo; or, Mapping the Waters* as Palimpsest of *The Tempest*," investigates Warner's 1992 novel, which uses Shakespeare's nomenclature and setting but also rewrites the plot of the play in feminist and post-colonial terms. The main character, Miranda Everard, a feminized Ariel, and Sycorax, who appears as Serafine, resist the oppressiveness of the Prospero character, a colonizing adventurer. Sanders says that Warner reflects the postcolonial scholarship of Paul Brown, Peter Hulme, and Stephen Greenblatt in *Indigo*.

Chapter 7, "Reclaimed from the Sea: Leslie Forbes's *Bombay Ice*," examines Forbes's 1998 novel, a thriller that takes place in contemporary India. Rosalind Bengal, a BBC employee, narrates *Bombay Ice*, and she finds herself on a trip to Bombay searching for the answer to a murder mystery: Who killed her brother-in-law's first wife, the movie star, May Sharma? Since Rosalind's sister is named Miranda, and her husband is Bollywood film director Prosper Sharma, who is currently adapting *The Tempest* for a screen play, as Sanders says, "the Shakespearean allusions are clear from early on" (Sanders 2001, 151). Marrying this Prospero and this Miranda, posits Sanders, inserts incestuous subtexts into the novel that further complicate the narrative. In addition, she asserts, the appropriation of Shakespeare functions as "a signifier of all things British" in this former colony, but "Indian culture both defines itself against and reinscribes itself within the British imperial past, for which Shakespeare has become a virtual synecdoche" (164). Sanders acknowledges the power of film culture in modern India, and she addresses Forbes's skillful fusion of that world into her novel when she discusses the fifth-act climax of *Bombay Ice*, since cinema and Shakespearean drama merge in the final moments of the book. While Prosper shoots the final scenes of his film, Ros tries to use the moment to force him into a revelation of his guilt as murderer by projecting images of the murder victim on the back of the stage; as Sanders notes, the scene recalls the device of the play-within-a-play from *Hamlet* and Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, in addition to reclaiming voice and agency for the female characters (167-68).

Chapter 8, "Including Shakespeare: The Novels of Gloria Naylor," maintains Sanders's concentration on *The Tempest*. After a general discussion of the Shakespearean allusions in Naylor's corpus, Sanders settles in for an extended analysis of her 1988 novel, *Mama Day* (Naylor

1988) which takes place on a barrier island between Georgia and South Carolina and features the title character (whose given name is Miranda) as the Prospero figure. An African American, feminine inversion of the white, male Shakespearean character, Mama Day (or Miranda) controls the local people and her surroundings through her knowledge of white magic. Sycorax appears as the powerful female ancestor Sapphira Wade, a slave woman accused of witchcraft, but Sanders claims that readers can also see her character "in the magical properties and maternalistic powers of Miranda 'Mama' Day herself" (Sanders 2001, 179). Mama Day's granddaughter Cocoa brings to the island a Caliban figure in the guise of her New York boyfriend, George, for he bears a deep sense of inferiority and is easily led astray by the island's ne'er-do-wells, Dr. Buzzard and Junior Lee. Though George suffers from a much more tragic fate than does Caliban and dies at the end of the novel, Cocoa experiences redemption and is reconciled with her southern slave roots. Thus, Sanders contends that the novel gives presence to silent, erased characters and acts as a political tool, whereby Naylor uses Shakespeare for her own purposes.

In Chapter 9, " 'Rainy Days Mean Difficult Choices': Jane Smiley's Appropriation of *King Lear* in *A Thousand Acres*" (1991) Sanders shifts her focus back to tragedy and presents the most sustained and cogent analysis of *Novel Shakespeares*. Sanders says that Smiley overturns what she calls the "inbuilt misogyny" in *Lear* by rewriting the play from the perspective of the women and making Lear the perpetrator of evil (Sanders 2001, 192). Smiley accomplishes this feat by weaving a complex and hidden history of incest and abuse in a contemporary American farm family. Larry Cook's sexual abuse of his daughters, Ginny and Rose, comes to the fore in a raging storm, which, as Sanders notes, occurs in the middle of the novel, just as the storm scene sits in the third act of Shakespeare's play. While Sanders reads Smiley's novel as "a recuperative feminist" text, she also sees the book from an ecocritical perspective (201, 202). Larry not only abuses his daughters, but he also mistreats his land with expansionist farming activities and pesticide use. The women will suffer from his irresponsible farm practices as well, for Rose contracts breast cancer, and Ginny cannot carry a pregnancy to term. In addition, the farm poisons relations between the sisters, for they will end up fighting against their younger sibling, Caroline, a slick Des Moines lawyer, for ownership of the farm. Sanders notes that Smiley transforms Caroline, the Cordelia figure, into an outspoken character, but by relegating her to the periphery of the novel and removing her from Larry's abuse (her sisters shielded her as a child), she remains "perennially innocent" and distanced from her sisters and from the reader (196). This distance means that Ginny cannot ever tell Caroline the whole truth about their father's abuse, for if she did, Caroline would never believe her. Yet Caroline remains convinced that she perceives a complete and true reality about their

idyllic familial history. As Sanders concludes, the strength of Smiley's appropriation thereby lies in its ambiguity, its ability to show a variety of sides.

In Chapter 10, " 'Out of Shakespeare': Other *Lears*," Sanders examines Valerie Miner's *A Walking Fire* (1994), Lucy Ellmann's *Sweet Desserts* (1988), and Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1990). Miner's novel, like Smiley's, depends on the plot of *Lear* for its appropriation, and Cora, a radical undergraduate who opposes the Vietnam War, serves as the Cordelia corollary. Cora is estranged from her father and her two brothers, George and Ron, whom Sanders sees as the "gender-transposed Goneril and Regan" characters of this text (Sanders 2001, 217). When Cora learns that the boys are trying to sell the family home and place their father in a nursing home against his will, she returns to the United States from Canada, where she has been working as a freelance journalist. Sanders notes that Cora's occupation endows her with voice, unlike Cordelia, but when she ends up imprisoned for her radical political activities, she experiences confinement rather than release. The last two novels that Sanders studies hold more tenuous parallels to *Lear*, bearing only allusive references to the play. As Sanders herself notes, neither *Sweet Desserts* nor *Cat's Eye* incorporate "the sustained templates the play provides for Smiley and Miner"; as a result, her analysis also lacks a similar depth of discussion (222).

*Novel Shakespeares* provides a wide-ranging overview of thirteen contemporary novels that appropriate Shakespeare in a variety of ways; concentrating on texts that more clearly parallel Shakespearean plays would have given Sanders's book a more specific focus and prompted the more developed analysis that she provides in her later chapters. In addition, some of Sanders's chapter titles and introductions seem rather opaque; giving readers a clear indication of what novels she will discuss and moving immediately to her argument is not always a strong suit. That said, scholars of Shakespearean adaptation will find Sanders's book a welcome addition to their field of study.

## References

- Atkinson, Kate. 1997. *Human Croquet*. New York: Picador USA.
- Atwood, Margaret. 1990. *Cat's Eye*. London: Virago.
- Carter, Angela. 1992. *Wise Children*. London: Vintage.
- Desmet, Christy, and Robert Sawyer, eds. 1999. *Shakespeare and Appropriation*. London: Routledge.
- Ellmann, Lucy. 1988. *Sweet Desserts*. London: Virago.
- Fischlin, Daniel, and Mark Fortier, eds. 2000. *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A Critical Anthology of Plays from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*. London: Routledge.
- Forbes, Leslie. 1998. *Bombay Ice*. London: Phoenix House.
- Jong, Erica. 1987. *Serenissima: A Novel of Venice*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Reprinted as *Shylock's Daughter*. 1995. New York: HarperCollins.
- Miner, Valerie. 1994. *A Walking Fire*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.
- Murdoch, Iris. 1973. *The Black Prince*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Murdoch, Iris. 1978. *The Sea, The Sea*. New York: Viking.
- Naylor, Gloria. 1988. *Mama Day*. New York: Vintage.
- Novy, Marianne. 1999. *Transforming Shakespeare: Contemporary Women's Revisions in Literature and Performance*. London: Macmillan.
- Sanders, Julie. 2001. *Novel Shakespeares: Twentieth-Century Women Novelists and Appropriation*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Smiley, Jane. 1991. *A Thousand Acres*. New York: Knopf/Random House.
- Trapido, Barbara. 1994. *Juggling*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Warner, Marina. 1992. *Indigo; or, Mapping the Waters*. London: Chatto & Windus.