

Book Review

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Women Talk Back to Shakespeare: Contemporary Adaptations and Appropriations. Jo Eldridge Carney. London: Routledge, 2022. 200 pp. \$136 (cloth); \$39.16 (paper, Ebook). ISBN 978-0-367-76351-0; ISBN 978-0-367-76352-7; ISBN 978-1-003-16658-0.

Jo Eldridge Carney's collection *Women Talk Back to Shakespeare: Contemporary Adaptations and Appropriations* examines six adaptations of Shakespeare by women in the last two decades, from Elizabeth Nunez's *Prospero's Daughter* (2006) to Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet* (2020), and one adaptation by a male author, Mark Haddon. Carney does not intend for this collection to be a comprehensive survey of adaptations by women since 2006, but rather a representative array of case studies. "Individually and collectively," she asserts, "this new generation of adaptations expands our notions about how women can continue their dialogue with Shakespeare across the centuries" (2). Although the collection could have benefited from a structure that put the chapters in a more productive conversation with each other (most likely a chronological structure), each chapter does work as a stand-alone analysis. Collectively, Carney argues that the texts in this collection "insist on a re-examination of their aesthetic and ideological terms, and they invite dialogue in which women and Shakespeare can talk back—and forth—with each other" (2). Rather than a comprehensive history, Carney's book thus offers an update to existing works that consider how women have talked back to Shakespeare, including Marianne Novy's *Women's Re-Visions of Shakespeare* (1990) and *Transforming Shakespeare: Contemporary Women's Re-Visions in Literature and Performance* (1999), and Julie Sanders's *Novel Shakespeares* (2001).

Carney's introduction situates her book in four principles of adaptation theory: a repudiation of fidelity criticism, the freedom of adaptations to transpose their sources from one genre to another, the ability to critique the ideology of the source text, and the back-and-forth conversation between source text and adaptation. The first chapter looks at the performance piece *Desdemona* (2011), a collaboration between writer Toni Morrison, director Peter Sellers, and musician Rokia Traoré. This adaptation gives voice to Desdemona, Emilia, and Barbary (here renamed Sa'ran) through music and dialogue, offering both a prequel and a sequel to *Othello* through Desdemona's childhood and her afterlife. Apart from Morrison and Traoré's *Desdemona* in this opening chapter, all the works discussed in this book are narrative fiction, including a historical novel, a postapocalyptic novel, and a postcolonial novel. Perhaps adding another stage work to balance out *Desdemona* could enhance Carney's discussion of this stage piece.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on adaptations of *The Tempest*: Trinidadian-American author Elizabeth Nunez's 2006 novel *Prospero's Daughter* and Canadian author Margaret Atwood's 2016 Hogarth Press series novel *Hag-Seed*. Nunez resets Shakespeare's play in postcolonial Trinidad, where Prospero stands in for the British Empire and commits crimes against humanity. In this story, Miranda and Caliban become allies against their colonizing father figure. Atwood revamps Shakespeare's play by making Prospero into the deposed director of a Canadian theatre festival who gets his revenge by staging the play with a group of prisoners, a change that resonates with the many prison programs that put Shakespeare to use as a form of redemption.

Chapters 4 and 5 look at two of the other Hogarth Press Shakespeare novelizations of Shakespearian romances: Jeanette Winterson's 2015 novel *The Gap of Time (The Winter's Tale)* and Mark Haddon's 2019 novel *The Porpoise (Pericles)*. Winterson transposes Shakespeare's romance to the 2008 London financial crisis, centering on the plot of a lost child. Haddon's novel alternates between the ancient, early modern, and contemporary time periods, giving the female characters autonomy over their destinies. Carney justifies including Haddon's novel as "arguably the most explicitly feminist" work in the collection because it "prioritizes a female voice" (2), though readers may quibble with this justification.

Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven* (2014) comprises chapter 6. *Station Eleven* begins with a production of *King Lear* in Toronto, and then follows a group of actors through a pandemic world. Although *Station Eleven* does not directly adapt *King Lear*, Carney argues that the novel "explores the same metaphysical questions that *Lear* asks regarding restoration and redemption in the aftermath of grand tragedy" (7). This chapter connects with Carney's discussion of Margaret Atwood's novel in chapter 3, since both adaptations deal with a Canadian resetting of Shakespeare.

The final chapter considers Maggie O'Farrell's 2020 novel *Hamnet* and biofiction about Shakespeare's family. Like *Station Eleven*, *Hamnet* is a novel about a plague, though one which Shakespeare would have lived through. O'Farrell's novel offers an explanation for the inspiration behind *Hamlet* but does not directly adapt any one of Shakespeare's plays. Through an enhanced story of Shakespeare's wife Anne, here named Agnes as she is called in her father's will, *Hamnet* resonates with Haddon's novel *The Porpoise* by giving voice to women who have previously been marginalized or subject to erasure.

In the afterword to *Women Talk Back to Shakespeare*, Carney acknowledges that the growing number of adaptations by women offer "further confirmation that women still have much to say to Shakespeare, and scholars still have much to say about these creative responses" (180). She ends with an open statement that "the point is not to catalogue every cultural Shakespeare sighting but to keep in mind that women artists continue to refashion, repurpose, reshape, and retell his work in innovative and unexpected ways" (181). This "conversation," as she puts it, continues to take place "in our literary world" (181), and this book provides a model for how to analyze and situate the work of women writers in connection with Shakespeare.