

## Book Review

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***Shakespeare's Serial Returns in Complex TV*. Christina Wald. Reproducing Shakespeare. Cham, Switz.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 267 pp. \$109.99 (cloth and paper); \$84.99 (ebook-EPUB and PDF). ISBN 978-3-030-46850-7; ISBN 978-3-030-46853-8; ISBN 978-3-030-46851-4.**

From the nexus of adaptation, media, television, and Shakespeare studies, Christina Wald's *Shakespeare's Serial Returns in Complex TV* asks both what contemporary television can do for Shakespeare, and what Shakespeare can do for today's TV. Part of Palgrave MacMillan's "Reproducing Shakespeare" series (ed. Thomas Cartelli, Katherine Rowe, Pascale Aebischer), Wald's volume explores British and Anglo-American TV series, 2010–2020, teasing out how Shakespearean subtext enriches the television shows in which they surface, and how the serial structure of these shows illuminates structures of repetition and variation embedded (not always visibly) in Shakespeare's plays.

Wald's introduction unpacks her key terms of "complex television" and "return," then sketches the background of contemporary Shakespearean seriality in both cinema and streaming television from 2000 to 2010 (e.g., *The Hollow Crown*, *Shakespeare Re-Told*, and *Slings & Arrows*). Wald distinguishes these early-millennial shows—where each episode or season is crafted around the classic plot elements and characters from a specific play—from more complicated modes of cross-episode interaction she identifies in her core material.

For Wald, this core includes prestige television shows with Shakespeare as a sustained intertext: shows whose nuanced narratives invoke a particular Shakespearean play across the arc of one or more seasons. In the first season of HBO's *Westworld*, Wald finds an adaptation of *The Tempest*, as protagonist Dolores alternately portrays Miranda's wide-eyed wonder and in her darker dual-cast role (Wyatt) Caliban's quest for revenge. Likewise, Wald sees Prospero in the theme park developers' quests for superhuman knowledge and control. Wald's next chapter, which traces connections between *Succession* and *King Lear*, draws not only on the similarities in plot (familial inheritance gone deeply dysfunctional) and characters (ungrateful children and a patriarch who cannot quite step aside), but also on the ubiquitous link between King Lear and Logan Roy in reviews, interviews, and marketing media. A subsequent chapter discusses how *Black Earth Rising* situates a family drama at the center of murderous political machinations, evoking a hazy form of *Hamlet* rising from the ashes of postwar Rwanda. Finally, Wald cross-reads *Coriolanus* with psycho-political thriller *Homeland*, linking the

play and the show through their mutual interest in depicting the difficulties of the war hero reassimilating to civilian life.

These four detailed case studies evolve from most to least obviously Shakespearean. Wald begins with the frequent and explicit quotations establishing the intertext in *Westworld's* opening episode; her closing case study takes the single Hamletian line in *Black Earth Rising*, uttered in the penultimate episode, as an invitation to retroactively perceive the play as a possible source text for the series. Between these two come *Succession*, whose specific references to *Lear* come in promotional material rather than on screen, and *Homeland's* use of recognizable Shakespearean actors to suggest connections between roles they play on stage and on screen. Wald's Shakespeare is thus "definitively post-textual," in the vein of Douglas Lanier: not tied to specific lines or characters, but rather referring to a broad collection of narratives that are highly mobile across contexts, styles, genres, and media platforms (Lanier 2010, 107, cited in Wald 5).

Wald largely sidesteps questions of recognizability and fidelity to openly embrace "unacknowledged and unintentional" adaptation alongside the more overtly allusive (a move bolstered by theorizations of "found adaptations" [Cartmell and Whelehan 2010], "unmarked adaptations" [Lanier 2017], and "non-adaptations" [Mallin 2019] in recent media studies) (11). Arguably, Wald's focus is less on Shakespeare as such than on the kinds of "returns" a loosely Shakespearean source text might inspire: the returns of the dead (*The Tempest/Westworld*), the return of the predecessor to undermine the successor (*Lear/Succession*), the return to roots (*Hamlet/Black Earth Rising*), and the return of the soldier (*Coriolanus/Homeland*). Wald argues for attending to reflexive, meta-adaptational commentaries embedded within these structures of echo or "return."

Wald succeeds in drawing out ways these shows use their Shakespearean legacies to dramatize the structures of resurrection and recycling both within and beyond their own episodes. As the voice of a deceased human programmer (Arnold) returns in coded form to prompt and cue *Westworld's* androids, for instance, the show invites us to consider the ways it, too, repurposes old scripts, from the Shakespearean quotes that litter the early episodes to the 1973 film for which the show is named. As the artificially intelligent "host" characters come to recognize—and eventually rebel against—the narrative "loops" that have been crafted for them, the viewer likewise begins to wonder how far the show might be permitted to wander from the tracks of established genres, dialogues, and desires. With a clever play on "ghosts" and "hosts," Wald suggests that these scripts are archives of cultural memory whose ostensible past-ness has never stopped them from "coming back to haunt us" in new works and new ways.

Slightly less compelling is Wald's parallel claim that these contemporary shows illuminate structures of seriality in Shakespeare's original plays that we might otherwise miss. While it is true that Shakespeare and his contemporaries would have cast recurring actors across shows and modified performances according to audience response, these elements are already well-established in historical repertory studies; moreover, they seem more akin to the sequential episodic structure of shows from the aughts than the complex multiseason arcs of the

2010s that center Wald's study. On the other hand, transhistorical readings of parallel political and cultural concerns evident in both plays and TV shows prove intriguing—for instance, as Wald invites us to examine shifting notions of death and identity across genocidal Rwanda and Reformation-era England.

The sheer density of detail is impressive, if sometimes overwhelming. The body chapters are perhaps best suited for readers already well-versed in the show at hand. Conversely, the introduction, as it moves deftly through huge amounts of both media theory references and television examples, can easily stand alone. The book also feels a bit at loose ends as it acknowledges that its case studies, for the most part, outgrow their Shakespearean influences after a season or two. After an exhaustive forensic examination of four hefty shows, Wald returns to close the loop on her initial promise to show us how each redeploys Shakespearean intertext to activate a modernized version of the anxiety motivating the play itself. But it almost feels as if Wald has outgrown these initial promises as well. One wishes she would dive into larger claims about form or genre: does revenge, as a mimetic genre, always require “returns”? And are these shows exceptional or representative in their uses of “return”? As the shows move further and further from their source texts, does post-textual Shakespeare in fact become a post-cinema or post-televisual Shakespeare? This highly granular study stops short of such explorations, but perhaps Wald's next work will pick up where this one leaves off.

#### REFERENCES

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