

Revering the Bard

ADAPTING SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS
FOR THE MODERN AGE

BY JESSICA TEISCH

WE'RE CERTAIN THAT ALL OF YOU haven't read Charles Dickens or Leo Tolstoy or Jane Austen or Ayn Rand. But we're sure that, sometime in your life, you have sampled William Shakespeare. The English poet and playwright is regarded as one of the greatest writers of all time—and

thanks to his mastery of universal themes and timeless archetypes, as well as the efforts of high school teachers across the globe, his works are the primary shared experience of secular Western literature. Known as "The Bard of Avon," Shakespeare left us an oeuvre consisting of more than two dozen plays, 150 sonnets, and several longer poems. The

resulting mythology and histories are rivaled as a cultural, literary touchstone only by the Old and New Testaments and the tales of the Greek and Roman gods.

Shakespeare's plays were written more than 400 years ago, and his private life has remained, well, quite private. As a result, he has been the subject of thousands of scholarly inquiries into his relationships, his religious beliefs, the source of his genius, his sexuality, and the possible collaborative nature of his authorship. If Shakespeare's life remains partially shrouded in mystery, so, too, can his plays pose some mysteries to even the most dedicated of readers. An entire cottage industry has emerged to evaluate and understand Shakespeare both in his time and in ours and make his work more accessible to today's readers. Shakespeare's works have provided an ongoing source of inspiration for new works of fiction, with authors catapulting the familiar story structures into contemporary surroundings or exploring the histories or continuing lives of Shakespeare's characters. Here we have selected several of Shakespeare's best-known comedies and dramas and highlighted those connections between his work in the 16th and 17th centuries and the works of contemporary authors. In addition to the novels below that bring Shakespeare's works into the modern age, we have recommended several biographical and analytical resources to enhance your understanding of the Bard's works.



Shakespeare, The "Chandos portrait," 1610

THE COMEDIES

A Midsummer Night's Dream (mid-1590s)

One of Shakespeare's most popular works, this romantic comedy was meant as light entertainment. Shakespeare drew on various sources to limn his characters, including Greek mythology, English fairy lore, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and medieval romance. Love, dreams, imagination, and the blurring of fantasy and reality all play a role in this imaginative comedy. Like other plays, it has a framing structure in which the Athenian world opens and closes the play; magic and fantasy dominate the middle.

THE STORY: Egeus, a friend of Theseus, Duke of Athens, approaches the duke for advice: his daughter, Hermia, is in love with Lysander, but she is already promised to Demetrius. Theseus, set to marry his newly conquered Queen of the Amazons, Hippolyta, decrees that Hermia should marry Demetrius. Lysander and Hermia decide to run away together through the woods and elope; Hermia reveals the plan to Helena, who has been rejected by Demetrius, and word gets around. Meanwhile, the fairies Oberon and Titania quarrel, and commoners practice a play for Theseus's wedding. A vengeful Oberon, the mischievous Puck, and the juice of a magical flower lead to romantic entanglements, magical mix-ups, and a triple wedding.

FAMOUS QUOTES

"The course of true love never did run smooth." (Lysander to Hermia, about their thwarted love)

"Lord, what fools these mortals be!" (Puck, about the young Athenians' ridiculous behavior)

A Midsummer Night's Dream, Updated

"A Midsummer Night's Dream"

In *The Sandman: Dream Country*

By Neil Gaiman (1991)

♦ WORLD FANTASY AWARD



This collection of *The Sandman* comic book series (presented in graphic novel form) contains Sandman #19, "A Midsummer Night's Dream," which combines mythology, history, fiction, and the supernatural. Apparently, Morpheus (or Dream, the main character in the series) struck a collaborative deal with Shakespeare and commissioned *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, which is performed at a faerie mound on Midsummer's Night, with Titania, Oberon, and Puck as spectators.

Magic Street

By Orson Scott Card (2005)

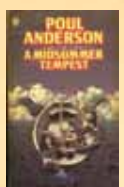


In this urban fantasy set in a middle-class African American neighborhood in contemporary Los Angeles, Mack, a beloved street boy, has magical powers he doesn't understand; he can dream others' wishes into horrific reality. One day, he discovers an invisible house, with an entrance into a magical world inhabited by the fairies from Shakespeare's play. Soon, Mack becomes a pawn in Oberon's plans—and involved in a battle between good and evil.

A Midsummer Tempest

By Poul Anderson (1974)

♦ MYTHOPOEIC AWARD, WORLD FANTASY AWARD NOMINEE, NEBULA AWARD NOMINEE



In a parallel (but more technically advanced) world, Shakespeare was the Great Historian, and his plays reflected real-life events. Inspired by *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, this alternate history fantasy novel takes place during the era of Charles I—but includes characters from both plays (like Oberon and Titania) as it addresses the English Civil War.

The Taming of the Shrew (1590–1594)

The Taming of the Shrew, an early romantic comedy, contains slapstick humor, mistaken identities, deceptions, courtships and marriages, and a happy ending—elements in many of Shakespeare's early comedies. Later, Shakespeare's vision, even his comedic one, darkened considerably. The play ambiguously satirizes and validates misogynistic behavior toward female "shrews"—women who resisted their husband's authority—reflecting the gender relations of the time.

THE STORY: A play within a play, *Taming of the Shrew* begins with Christopher Sly, a drunkard, who is deceived into believing he is a nobleman. He watches a play depicting a nobleman, Petruchio, who, desiring her fortune, marries Katherine—the outspoken, unruly, and ill-tempered shrew of the title. She must be tamed, of course, so that Petruchio (who treats her terribly) remains the master. A subplot involves the romantic entanglements of Kate's popular and more-favored younger sister, who can't marry until Kate does.

FAMOUS QUOTES

"Faith, as you say, there's small choice in rotten apples."

(Hortensio to Gremio)

The Taming of the Shrew, Updated

Kiss Me, Kate

By Samuel and Bella Spewack (1948)



Kiss Me, Kate is structured as a play within a play, with the inside play a musical version of *The Taming of the Shrew*. The plot centers on the director of a Broadway musical, who stars with his ex-wife in the roles of Petruchio and Katherine. They use the stage as a battleground for their marital discord, and after many romantic mix-ups and misunderstandings, everyone returns to his or her proper lover. The Spewacks wrote the book for the Tony Award-winning musical version of *Kiss Me, Kate*, with music and lyrics by Cole Porter.

The Merchant of Venice (1596–1598)

Shylock, the wealthy Jewish moneylender, is perhaps one of Shakespeare's most famous—and ambiguous—characters, even though *Merchant* is considered one of the Bard's minor plays. Because his role is so subject to a director's interpretation, Shylock often incites condemnation as a villain lacking mercy—or as a sympathetic character for his unjust trial. The play (one of many set in Venice) reflects the anti-Semitic climate of Elizabethan England; English Jews had been expelled in the Middle Ages, not to return until the rule of Oliver Cromwell.

THE STORY: The play opens with a deal: Bassanio, a young Venetian, approaches his friend Antonio (the merchant of the title) for travel funds to court the wealthy heiress, Portia. Antonio turns to Shylock, who stipulates that if Antonio doesn't repay the loan in a timely manner, Shylock will take a pound of his flesh. Bassanio successfully woos Portia, but Antonio, to Shylock's delight, defaults on his loan; meanwhile, Shylock's daughter Jessica elopes with a Christian man. Shylock has Antonio arrested—but Portia, disguised as a doctor, uses Venice's laws against the lender, robbing him of his money and forcing his conversion to Christianity.

FAMOUS QUOTES

“The pound of flesh which I demand of him/ Is dearly bought. 'Tis mine, and I will have it.”

(Shylock, extending the Venetian law on slavery to Antonio)

“All that glisters is not gold.”

(The Prince of Morocco fails to win Portia's hand after failing a test)

The Merchant of Venice, Updated

Shylock's Daughter

A Novel of Love in Venice (formerly titled *Serenissima*)

By Erica Jong (1987)



In this semifantastical novel by the author of *Fear of Flying*, Jessica Pruitt, a famous American actress, travels to Venice to judge a film festival and star in an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*. Rather than return to Hollywood, she decides to stay in Venice—a city of intrigue and cruelty. One day, Jessica magically travels back to the 16th-century Jewish ghetto, where, as Shylock's daughter, she gets to know the young Will Shakespeare quite well.

The Last Days of Shylock

By Ludwig Lewisohn (1931)

In this attempt to paint Shakespeare's character in a more positive light, Shylock is a gentler, better man who never really intended to take a pound of Antonio's flesh. After his enforced baptism in Venice (part of Shakespeare's original plot), Shylock escapes to Constantinople (a new development), tries to found a Jewish colony, wreaks revenge on Venice-ruled Cyprus, embraces Kabbalistic mysticism, and happily reunites with his daughter, Jessica, and her children.

The Tempest (1610–1611)

The Tempest may have been the last play written exclusively by Shakespeare, but it was not among the most popular during his time. Today, this dramatic tragicomedy, filled with political intrigue and themes of colonization (given the newly discovered Americas), change, endings, and new beginnings, is considered one of Shakespeare's greatest works. Its major characters live on: the sorcerer Prospero, the exiled Duke of Milan who tries to transform magic into spirit; Miranda, Prospero's daughter; the imprisoned Caliban, the oldest inhabitant of the island and Prospero's deformed slave; and the spirit slave Ariel.

THE STORY: When a tempest strikes a ship carrying Alonso, King of Naples, his son, Ferdinand, and Antonio, the usurping Duke of Milan, the men fear for their lives. On a remote island, the sorcerer and former duke Prospero reveals to his daughter, Miranda, that he engineered the tempest to punish his brother Antonio, who stole his power and sent him into exile. For 12 years, Prospero has raised Miranda with slaves Caliban and Ariel. Soon, Prospero has the opportunity to forgive his enemies, who wash ashore and plot with Caliban to kill Prospero; to forestall a rebellion; to cultivate the love between Miranda and Prince Ferdinand; to relinquish his magical powers; and to regain his kingdom.

FAMOUS QUOTES

“We are such stuff/
As dreams are made on, and our little life/
Is rounded with a sleep.”

(Prospero, about the plot against his life)

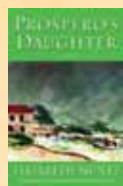
“O wonder!/ How many goodly
creatures are there here!/ How
beauteous mankind is!/ O brave new
world/ That hath such people in’t!”

(Miranda, upon meeting the party
of the King of Naples)

The Tempest, Updated

Prospero's Daughter

By Elizabeth Nunez (2006)



Set in Trinidad and Tobago in the early 1960s, on the brink of the islands' independence, *Prospero's Daughter* explores themes of colonialism—specifically, the clearly drawn lines of class and race in the British colony. Dr. Peter Gardner (a more savage version of Prospero) arrives on the island with his baby daughter after fleeing England, steals the home of mixed-race Carlos (Caliban), and enslaves him. Tensions erupt when Gardner's daughter (Miranda) and Carlos fall in love.

HISTORICAL FICTION, ALTERNATE HISTORIES, AND MORE

RULED BRITANNIA | HARRY TURTLEDOVE

(2002): In this alternate history set in 1598, the Spanish Armada has triumphed over England, Spain rules England, and Queen Elizabeth sits imprisoned in the Tower of London. William Shakespeare is creatively stifled in this environment of religious and civil repression—until he is commissioned by the British resistance to pen a play designed to stir up rebellion against Spanish rule. Will Shakespeare the liberator—or Shakespeare the traitor—prevail?



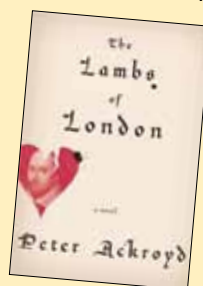
NOTHING LIKE THE SUN | ANTHONY BURGESS

(1964): In this fictional biography written in period dialogue, the author invents a bawdy love life for the Bard. The novel depicts Will striving to understand just exactly what kind of love he desires: is it carnal love, or a more philosophical and idealistic love that could lead to great literary works? The author suggests that Will's sexual lust led to his creative genius.

THE LAMBS OF LONDON | PETER ACKROYD

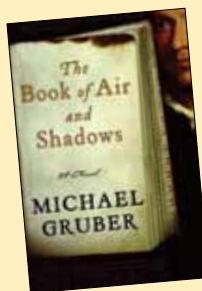
(2006): This novel, by the author of *Shakespeare: The Biography* (see page 20), takes place in the 19th century,

before the real-life Mary Lamb murdered her mother and a decade before her brother, English essayist Charles Lamb, published *Tales from Shakespeare* (see below). Charles, a young writer, and Mary, constrained by domesticity, escape their lives by reading the Bard. Then a young bookseller seduces the siblings with a “lost” Shakespearean play. But is it authentic—or a fantastic hoax? (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2006)



THE BOOK OF AIR AND SHADOWS | MICHAEL GRUBER

(2007): When Carolyn Rolly and aspiring filmmaker Albert Crosetti find letters from a 17th-century soldier in an antiquarian bookstore, Crosetti believes they could lead to one of Shakespeare's lost plays. He sells most of the letters to a Shakespearean scholar but retains a few notes. The scholar then turns over the letters to intellectual property lawyer Jake Mishkin—and is soon found dead. As Mishkin hides from Russian gangsters, his and Crosetti's paths cross—and they race to find the Bard's missing manuscript. (★★★★ July/Aug 2007)



WILL | GRACE TIFFANY (2004): The author of *My Father Had a Daughter* (2003), about Shakespeare's youngest daughter, Judith, explores the life of the Bard. The story centers on Will's relationship with his uncle, Edward Arden, whose execution turns Will against the monarchy; his theatrical crowd in London; and his marriage to Anne Hathaway and other loves.

THE QUALITY OF MERCY | FAYE KELLERMAN

(1989): Kellerman is best known for her Detective Peter Decker/Rina Lazarus series, but in this stand-alone novel, she historicizes the young actor-playwright William Shakespeare's life. In Elizabethan England, Rebecca Lopez and her converso family (Spanish Jews posing as Anglicans and practicing their faith in secret) smuggle Jews out of Spain. At the same time, the young Will seeks revenge for the death of his mentor. Soon, Will and Rebecca meet in an unlikely place—and their lives change forever.

THE PLAYERS A Novel of the Young Shakespeare | STEPHANIE COWELL

(1997): This historical novel imagines Will's creative and emotional self-discovery. Focused on his apprenticeship years, it depicts the young playwright as an unhappily married man living in poverty; his friendships with Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson; and the London of Elizabethan England—a city of brothels, churches, shops, and gambling dens. Love, of course, guides Will's genius. ■

Brave New World

By Aldous Huxley (1932)



The title of Huxley's science fiction classic refers to Miranda's words in *The Tempest*. In this darkly satiric vision of a technically advanced utopia in which people are genetically bred to serve the World State, Bernard Marx (a Caliban type) desires more. Then he meets John the Savage (a Miranda type), who quotes endlessly from Shakespeare and is shocked by the "brave new world." Here, Shakespeare's messy vision of humanity fails to match its utopian form.

Caliban's Hour

By Tad Williams (1993)



Caliban, tamed and abused by Prospero and then abandoned by him when he and Miranda escaped their island of exile, vows to avenge the injustices done to him. Twenty years after the events of *The Tempest*, Caliban tracks down the object of his lust and hatred—Miranda—to wreak revenge. But the cycle of desire, retribution, and renewal continues.

THE HISTORIES

The Henriad (1595–1599)

The Henriad refers to Shakespeare's historical tetralogy: *Richard II*; *Henry IV, Part 1*; *Henry IV, Part 2*; and *Henry V*. The plays, based on real people and events in 15th-century Elizabethan England, chronicle the rise of the English Royal House of Lancaster. Henry IV (Henry Bolingbroke) deposed Richard II through the civil war depicted in *Richard II*, but his reign is dominated by an even greater civil insurrection. King Henry V (King Henry IV's son—formerly Harry Monmouth, or Prince Hal) evolves from an irresponsible young man into a brilliant, dignified king after his father's death—with eyes set on invading France.

The fictional Sir John Falstaff, Henry V's (Prince Henry's) "mentor" and close friend, is one of Shakespeare's most popular characters. He appears in *Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (his death is mentioned in *Henry V*)—and he has been a subject of many modern-day spoofs and adaptations. A likeable but arrogant, disloyal, lecherous, and cowardly knight, drunk, and cheat, Falstaff leads Prince Hal (the future King Henry V) into all sorts of trouble. Falstaff is generally perceived as a comic figure, but with his awareness that life is a charade, his archetype cuts much deeper.

FAMOUS QUOTES

"The better part of valour is discretion; in the which better part,

I have saved my life."

(*Henry IV, Part 1*, Falstaff feigning death)

"He will give the devil his due."

(from *Henry IV, Part 1*)

Falstaff, Updated

Falstaff

By Robert Nye (1976)

♦ HAWTHORNDEN PRIZE

♦ GUARDIAN FICTION PRIZE



Now in his 80s, the still-lecherous Sir John Falstaff writes his memoirs about life during one of England's most tumultuous times. As he attempts to set history straight while recreating his own legend, Falstaff recalls his relationship with the fickle young Hal, his own exploits on the battlefield and in bed, and other parts of history Shakespeare omitted from the *Henriad*. Nye also wrote *The Late Mr. Shakespeare* (1999), which revealed Shakespeare's life through the perspective of a former boy actor, and *Mrs. Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (2000), an irreverent look at Will's secret life.

THE TRAGEDIES

Romeo and Juliet (1591–1595)

Along with *Hamlet*, this early tragedy is among Shakespeare's most frequently performed plays. Romeo and Juliet, the two "star-cross'd lovers" in Verona, Italy, are archetypes of young love, but the play discusses fate and chance, unbiddled passion, violence, family loyalty, and social identity as well. Shakespeare borrowed from other 16th-century tragic romances to craft his play, but he expanded the characters and the subplots considerably.

THE STORY: The play's prologue establishes that the children of two feuding families will both love and die. Romeo (Montague) and his cousin Benvolio go uninvited to a party held for Juliet (Capulet). Learning they are mortal enemies, Romeo and Juliet nonetheless fall in love, and Friar Laurence agrees to marry them. However, when family rivalries result in deaths on both sides, Romeo is banished from Verona. Meanwhile, as plans for Juliet's wedding to another man ensue, Juliet, with the help of the friar, who wants to reunite her with Romeo, drinks a potion to make her appear dead. Romeo learns of Juliet's supposed death—and nothing ends well. The silver lining? The lovers' deaths end the family feud.



L'ultimo bacio dato a Giulietta da Romeo, 1823, by Francesco Hayez

FAMOUS QUOTES

“What’s in a name?/ That which we call a rose/ By any other word would smell as sweet.”

(Juliet, about Romeo)

“O, I am fortune’s fool!”

(Romeo, criticizing fate)

Romeo and Juliet, Updated

West Side Story

By Arthur Laurents (1957)



Laurents wrote the book for what would become one of the most popular musicals of all time, with music composed by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. In Manhattan’s Upper West Side in the 1950s, two teenage gangs—the “American” Jets and the Puerto Rican Sharks—vie for neighborhood dominance. Tony (Romeo) of the Jets falls in love with Maria (Juliet), the sister of the Puerto Rican gang leader. The original finale mirrored Shakespeare’s play, but preview audiences found it too depressing—hence the different ending.

Hamlet (1599–1601)

Hamlet, one of Shakespeare’s finest tragedies, still ranks high among the most performed plays. Yet it is still a work

of unanswered questions: Why does Hamlet delay avenging his father’s death? Who *is* the ghost? Is Hamlet really mad? *Hamlet* explores real and feigned madness, emotions ranging from grief to rage, and revenge, incest, guilt, moral dishonesty, and thought versus action, appearance versus reality.

THE STORY: After King Hamlet’s death, Queen Gertrude remarries Claudius, Hamlet’s brother. Prince Hamlet is appalled when his father’s ghost divulges that Claudius poisoned him in order to assume the throne. The ghost king begs his son to avenge his murder; Hamlet agrees, and feigns madness to disguise his motive. Meanwhile, King Claudius fends off war with Fortinbras of Norway, and employs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to keep an eye on the mad prince. Polonius, Claudius’s advisor, and Ophelia, his daughter and Hamlet’s love interest, try to entrap Hamlet, but Hamlet devises a scheme to catch Claudius. A slaying, a botched plot, a suicide, and a royal massacre bring retribution to all.

FAMOUS QUOTES

“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.”

(Marcellus, about Hamlet’s father’s ghost)

“To be, or not to be: that is the question:/ Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer/ The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune/ Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,/ And by opposing, end them? To die,—to sleep— /No more. . . .”

(Hamlet’s soliloquy, about the moral legitimacy of suicide)

“Get thee to a nunn’ry, why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?”

(Hamlet to Ophelia, after claiming that he did once, but does not now, love her)

Hamlet, Updated

The Story of Edgar Sawtelle

David Wroblewski (2008)



In the woods of Wisconsin, the young, mute Edgar Sawtelle communicates through sign language to his family and their breed of clever dogs. Life on the farm becomes complicated, however, with the arrival of Claude, Edgar’s estranged uncle. When Edgar’s father dies under mysterious circumstances and Claude woos Edgar’s beloved mother, it becomes evident that something is rotten in the state of Wisconsin. (★★★★★ Sept/Oct 2008)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

By Tom Stoppard (1966)



The title of the absurdist, existentialist tragicomic play references the deaths of Hamlet's double-dealing servants and childhood friends in Shakespeare's play's final scene. Stoppard gives these two minor characters—nonsensical clowns, really—center stage as he follows their misadventures against the real background of *Hamlet*. Try as they might, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot deviate from Shakespeare's original script, which condemns them to death in England.

Gertrude and Claudius

By John Updike (2000)



Updike, best known for his Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom novels, reimagines the adulterous events leading up to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Long before King Hamlet's death, the sweet, lonely Gertrude finds herself alienated from a husband she doesn't love and drawn to her

brother-in-law Claudius. Although this postmodern story ends at the close of the original Act I, scene ii of *Hamlet*, we all know how this story of dangerous liaisons turns out.

King Lear (1603–1606)

Considered one of Shakespeare's greatest works, this dark tragedy, one of the most popular to be staged, is based on the legend of the eighth-century BC King Leir of Britain. About human nature, kinship, generational conflict, madness, and suffering at the hands of one's children, *King Lear* also explores the question of whether justice exists. While readers may expect a happy ending, the play ends with the death of Cordelia and a mad old man.

THE STORY: The aging King Lear, intending to abdicate the throne and divide his kingdom among his three daughters—Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia—disowns his favorite, Cordelia, who refuses to outdo her sisters in exaggerating her love for their father. Soon after inheriting Lear's lands, however, Goneril and Regan turn against him, and Lear

CRITICISM, BIOGRAPHIES, AND MORE

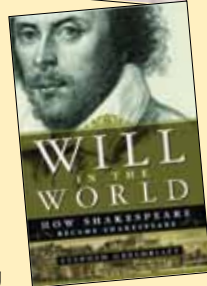
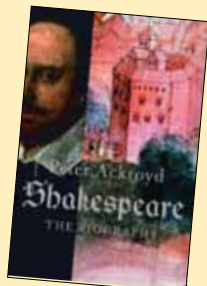
TALES FROM SHAKESPEARE | CHARLES AND MARY LAMB (1807; UPDATED):

The famed brother-and-sister team retells Shakespeare's plays—from *Much Ado About Nothing* to *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Although written originally for younger readers, *Tales* transforms Shakespeare's admittedly archaic English verse into lovely prose that captures the essence of each play.

WILL IN THE WORLD How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare | STEPHEN GREENBLATT (2004):

While Greenblatt has no definite answers to Shakespeare's mysterious life, he has plenty to say about the historical context that shaped this enigmatic genius and his works. By placing Shakespeare in the political unrest following the Reformation, the onset of Renaissance pageantry, and London's dynamism, he dissects Shakespeare's shadowy life in this fusion of biography, history, and criticism. (★★★★ SELECTION Nov/Dec 2004)



SHAKESPEARE AFTER ALL | MARJORIE GARBER (2005):

Presenting each play in chronological order to depict his evolution as a playwright, Garber offers close readings of Shakespeare's plays. She dissects each play's themes, characters, and plots, explaining how to read them, decipher their context,

and understand how our readings have changed over time. Were Romeo and Juliet's first lines to each other a symbol of unrequited love—or, since they ended in a kiss, something so much more?

(★★★★ Mar/Apr 2005)

A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE 1599 | JAMES SHAPIRO (2005):

In 1599, the 35-year-old Shakespeare reputedly wrote *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It*, and *Hamlet*—all presented in the new Globe Theatre. These plays, Shapiro argues, mirrored Queen Elizabeth's turbulent court, the downfall of the Earl

of Essex, and other public and private events. Lines in *Henry V*, for example, suggest an Irish rebellion—linking Shakespeare's works to contemporaneous world events.

THE SHAKESPEARE WARS | RON ROSENBAUM (2006):

Drawing on voluminous research and inside information on many key Shakespeare critics, scholars, and stage directors, Rosenbaum offers

a treatise on Shakespeare's body of work and its handling four centuries after the Bard's death. He includes tales of messy and unsavory academic feuds over the sources of his plays—and, yes, even his punctuation and spelling—as well as discussions on King Lear's final words, the origins

of Shakespeare's characters, and the relative merits of film versus stage productions. (★★★ Jan/Feb 2007)

SHAKESPEARE The Biography | PETER ACKROYD (2005):

Instead of praising the Bard's literary genius, Ackroyd posits Shakespeare as a consummate theater professional. Placing him within the context of English and Elizabethan theater, Ackroyd offers possible explanations of Shakespeare's life and "lost years" that fill in gaps in the knowledge. In the end, the Shakespeare portrayed in this lengthy but worthwhile book comes off as a modern, ambitious man, fully immersed in theater life. ■



slowly goes insane. He flees his daughters' homes and meets a nobleman, the Earl of Gloucester, whose illegitimate son, Edmund, has tricked him into believing that Edgar, the legitimate son, is trying to kill him. Meanwhile, Cordelia, who has married the King of France, leads an army to restore Lear to this throne. The English, led by Edmund, capture Lear and Cordelia, who briefly reconcile—but nothing ends well.

FAMOUS QUOTES

“Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave/ My heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty/ According to my bond; no more nor less.”

(Cordelia, expressing her love to Lear but refusing to exaggerate it)

“Oh, that way madness lies; let me shun that.”

(Lear, trying to stop obsessing about the ingratitude of Regan and Goneril, who have cast him out into a storm)

“As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods, / They kill us for their sport.”

(Gloucester, realizing there is no divine justice in the world)

King Lear, Updated

A Thousand Acres

By Jane Smiley (1991)

◆ PULITZER PRIZE, NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD



Ginny Cook (Goneril), the eldest of three daughters and a farmer's wife, looks back on the time when her father, Larry Cook (Lear), handed over his large Iowa farm to his three daughters. When the youngest, Caroline (Cordelia), expresses her doubts, Larry removes her from the inheritance. This action sets in motion a chain of events that reveal dark, terrible secrets of sexual abuse, sibling rivalry, betrayal, and family guilt. The Cooks' neighbors mirror *King Lear's* Gloucester, Edgar, and Edmund. The novel ends differently from the original—but equally tragically.

Macbeth (1603–1606)

Although Shakespeare's shortest (and bloodiest) tragedy, it is one of his most famous in its emotional portrayal of the corrupt nature of ambition and power. *Macbeth* reflects the playwright's close relationship with King James I—from Scottish lineage and a descendent of the historical Banquo.

THE STORY: Macbeth, a Scottish general, receives a prophecy from three witches that he'll be made Thane of

Cawdor and then, one day, the King of Scotland; they also prophesy that Banquo, his companion, will beget a line of Scottish kings. When the first prophecy comes true, Lady Macbeth prompts the overly ambitious Macbeth to murder King Duncan at Dunsinane. That night, Macbeth stabs the king, despite visions of a bloody dagger, and ascends to the throne. What he doesn't count on, however, are his guilt and his fear, which lead to a tyrannical and murderous rule to protect the throne and prevent others—Banquo's heirs; Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain; Macduff, a Scottish nobleman; and English armies—from threatening his power.

FAMOUS QUOTES

“Is this a dagger which I see before me:/ The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee./ I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.”

(Macbeth, on his decision to kill the king)

“Out, damn'd spot! out, I say! One, two—why then 'tis time to do't. Hell is murky.”

(Lady Macbeth, sleepwalking and consumed by guilt)

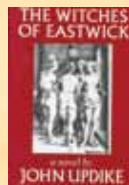
“Out, out, brief candle!/ Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player/ That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,/ And then is heard no more.”

(Macbeth, after he learns of Lady Macbeth's death and realizes his own undoing)

Macbeth, Updated

The Witches of Eastwick

By John Updike (1984)



The sinister witches in *Macbeth* make an appearance as three witches living in 1970s Eastwick, Rhode Island. Each acquired magical powers following their divorces—one could fly, another could turn milk into cream, and the last could create thunderstorms. Then, they find themselves under the satanic spell of a new man in town—but his marriage to another friend sets up the trio for revenge. The sequel: *The Widows of Eastwick* (★★★ Jan/Feb 2008).

Lady Macbeth

By Susan Fraser King (2008)



In 11th-century Scotland, the much-maligned Lady Macbeth tells her side of the story. Rue (Lady Gruadh, or the future Lady Macbeth), the last female descendent of Scottish royalty, is forced to marry Macbeth, a warlord, after he kills her first husband. Rue slowly starts to admire Macbeth's ambition as he embarks on a bloody, violent campaign to unite Scotland. ■