

*Hamlet the Dane: "Tell My Story"**Graham Holderness***Modernism and the Novel**

In the early twentieth century, Modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce transformed the novel. They ruptured the dominant traditions of nineteenth-century fiction by breaking up the sequential cause-and-effect of traditional narrative, disrupting the unity of plot and coherence of character, using ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions to challenge literary meaning, and foregrounding inward consciousness over rational, objective discourse. Social reality became distorted through the lens of the individual character's stream-of-consciousness; language became a dense, complex substance embodying rather than reflecting reality and meaning; and the novel itself was reconceived as a relatively autonomous artifact and a space of aesthetic experiment.

In this environment, writers were able to incorporate Shakespeare into the novel in new, exciting and influential ways. For example, Shakespeare features strikingly in Virginia Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts* (Woolf 1941). Set in a 'traditional' country-house and rural-village England, about to be overwhelmed by war, the central action of the novel entails the performance of a historical pageant before an audience of the main characters. The presence of Shakespeare also pervades the novel – in the form of quotations and misquotations supplied by both the characters and the narrator. When the pageant culminates with mirrors held up to the audience, confronting the spectators with a direct reflection of contemporary life, Shakespeare is both the mirror and an element of what is being reflected in it. The experimental form of the Modernist novel has allowed Shakespeare to enter the charmed circle of the artefact, not as a social reality to be displayed, but as part of the very fabric of social existence that the novel form seeks to emulate.

Similarly, in what is arguably the greatest Modernist novel, James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Joyce 1922), Shakespeare again becomes part of the fabric

of the work. In chapter nine, Joyce's hero, Stephen Dedalus, argues that the emotions dramatised in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* can be traced to the poet's own personal experience of bereavement (of son and father) and an alleged betrayal by his conjecturally adulterous wife. But in these pages Joyce is also devising, within the medium of fiction, a method for talking about the relations between a writer and his writing. This metafictional dimension of the novel, which both invites awareness of its own artifice and internalises literary-critical debate and interpretation, opens up the porousness of the novel form and makes us aware of the shifting border lines between individuals and personalities both inside and outside fiction.

The Shakespearean experiments of Woolf and Joyce made it possible for later Modernist writers to draw Shakespeare ever deeper and closer into the structure, texture and fabric of the novel. In Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* (Murdoch 1973), the 'black prince' of the title is both Hamlet and a platonic 'dark god' of transgressive desire. The brief temporary passion between the elderly writer and the young girl seems to bring love and art together. Murdoch infiltrates Shakespearean language directly into character as well as plot, allowing Arnold to speak and even think in lines from several Shakespeare plays and especially his *Sonnets*. Frequently, lines of Shakespeare lie ambiguously on the page, leaving the reader uncertain as to their status as quotation, recorded speech, thought or narrative. The discrepant idioms of Shakespeare and the novel have by this stage found a common ground.

A novelist whose work has been claimed for both Modernism and Postmodernism, Antony Burgess, exerted a potent influence on the next stage of development for Shakespeare and the novel. The story of Burgess's *Nothing Like the Sun* (Burgess 1964) draws on the more speculative side of Shakespeare biography: Shakespeare has a full-blown affair with the earl of Southampton and is infected with syphilis by a black prostitute, the 'Dark Lady.' The style of the novel combines an idiom of invented Elizabethan rhetoric, permeated by Shakespeare quotation, with the experimental liberty and self-reflexive playfulness of Modernist prose; the reader is continually aware that a reconstructed past, fashioned from largely fictional materials, is being transmuted through a modern sensibility. Burgess's Shakespeare often thinks in the language of his own plays, and other characters frequently provide him with some of his most familiar lines, simultaneously inventing and quoting them in advance. In its synthesis of scholarship and imagination, its metafictional playing with past and present, its mixing of genres and collocation of styles, *Nothing Like the Sun* pushed the Shakespeare novel into the new territory of Postmodernism.

From the 1970s onward it became possible for novelists to appropriate Shakespeare's works directly and with a freedom and privilege previously unknown to the modern novel. Novels could be unashamedly based in fiction rather than in fact. Writers could assume, on the part of their readers, at least a minimal knowledge of Shakespeare and could build plots, and fashion characters, explicitly from Shakespearean sources. In addition, with the massive expansion of higher education, and the theoretical revolution in the humanities, novelists could presuppose, alongside a knowledge of Shakespeare, a readerly interest in questions of cultural politics and problems of class, race and gender. Novelists have explicitly adapted his plays and characters to service projects in the reassessment of gender, race and sexuality.

In the twenty-first century, the Shakespearean novel is undergoing a renaissance. The long prose narrative has been energised by interfaces with different media, especially TV, film and the internet. New methods of publishing and consuming literature have transformed the nature of readership into an interactive participation. The postmodern collapsing of generic restrictions has enabled Shakespeare to migrate much more comprehensively across previously sealed boundaries, into popular genres such as crime fiction, paranormal romance, dystopian fable and supernatural fantasy. In contemporary fiction, Shakespeare himself is as likely to be found killing zombies or vampires as writing poems and plays (Handeland 2010, 2012; Holderness 2015).

Hamlet and Fiction

Hamlet has been rewritten ever since it was written, in all literary and cultural forms, not least the novel. In *The Ghosts of Hamlet* (Scofield 1980) Martin Scofield shows how most of the major figures of twentieth-century fiction (James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Franz Kafka) at some point engaged with the text of *Hamlet*. But the encounters that emerge from his pages always seem to produce an unmistakably Modernist *Hamlet*, and the history he traces is one of cultural repositioning rather than one of creative reconstruction, reinterpretation, rewriting. Twentieth-century novelists inherited *Hamlet* as a massive presence within the culture, an unassailable artistic monument, the great masterwork of the great master-dramatist. Modernist writers were naturally prompted to position themselves *vis-à-vis* its cultural potency, to clear their own space of operations; much twentieth-century *Hamlet*-oriented writing, therefore, is satirical, distanced by irony and detachment from what was perceived to be the tradition. At

the same time there is, in all the writers Scofield surveyed – Joyce, Lawrence, Kafka – a serious, often sustained, grappling with *Hamlet*, and most of them can be found writing about the play in discursive critical prose as well as in poetry and fictional narrative. But they are all concerned to get what they can out of *Hamlet*, rather than to rewrite, remake or re-create the play.

Hamlet has remained a seminal source into the twenty-first century; as this chapter will demonstrate, however, millennial novelists have exploited and repurposed formal methods from both the old, historical and realist novel, and from the experimental and metafictional novel of Modernism. Novelists writing since 2000 have produced fictional texts that enlarge, supplement and extend the play, simultaneously pushing *Hamlet* back into history and making full use of Modernist irony and self-consciousness. This chapter examines, through a few examples, some aspects of twenty-first-century fiction's capacity for appropriating *Hamlet*. In particular I want to show how millennial Shakespeare fiction can be both historical and metafictional: self-consciously basing texts on the platform of Shakespearean drama and simultaneously relocating Shakespeare's play back into the Scandinavian history from which it originally derived.

Hamlet in Kronborg

In *The Visit of the Royal Physician*, by Per Olov Enquist (Enquist 2003), the young Queen Caroline Mathilde, married to the demented King Christian IV of Denmark, is under arrest for her association with the radical doctor Struensee and held in Kronborg Castle. She looks out across the Oresunde and broods on Shakespeare:

This was Hamlet's castle, and she had seen a performance of *Hamlet* in London. A mad king [sic] who forced his beloved to commit suicide; she had wept as she watched the play, and the first time she visited Kronborg the castle had seemed so impressive in some way. Now it was not impressive. It was just a horrible story in which she was imprisoned. She hated *Hamlet*. She didn't want her life to be written by a play. She imagined that she would write her own life. 'Imprisoned by love', Ophelia had died; what was *she* now imprisoned by? Was it the same as Ophelia, by love? Yes, it was love. But she had no intention of going mad and dying. She was determined that, under no circumstances, none whatsoever, would she become Ophelia.

She refused to become a play.

She hated Ophelia and the flowers in her hair and her martyr's death and her demented song that was merely ridiculous. I am only 20 years old, she would constantly repeat to herself; she was 20 years old and imprisoned in a

Danish play written by an Englishman, and not imprisoned in anyone else's madness, and she was still young. (pp. 270–1)

Kronborg Castle is of course Hamlet's 'Elsinore' (Helsingor is the name of the town it neighbours). The present Renaissance palace was developed from an earlier mediaeval fortress by King Frederick II, one of Queen Elizabeth's many suitors and father to Anne of Denmark, who married James I. Mathilde thinks of it as 'Hamlet's castle,' an ironic authorial comment on the appropriation of a national monument by a foreign fictional character.

For the tourist visiting Kronborg today, the Shakespeare connection is very much on the menu, and *Hamlet* is frequently performed, along with other Shakespeare plays, at drama festivals there. Mathilde extends her reflection on cultural imperialism to a larger metaphor in which Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* forms an imprisoning and constricting force field, trapping the individual in its tragic inevitability. The young queen is literally imprisoned by reactionary forces in Danish society; she is also (like the characters in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*) metaphorically trapped inside Shakespeare's tragedy, attached to a mad king, and assigned the role of Ophelia. Her political, moral and theatrical duty is to go insane and kill herself, but she resists this destiny: 'She has no intention of going mad and dying.' 'She refused to become a play.' Here, Shakespeare is aligned with the repressive, the reactionary, the intolerant in society and culture, and the free spirit has to refuse the roles imposed on her. Resistance against oppression, and disavowal of Shakespeare, become linked in a common language of moral and political protest.

The deeper irony that subverts this whole structure of antitheses – reality/fiction, nationalism/cultural hegemony, Denmark/England – is that Hamlet was Denmark's, a chapter in the legendary history of the Danes, long before he became Shakespeare's. While affirming the priority of a national, Scandinavian culture, Enquist's writing lies in a direct line with European Modernism. Shakespeare is the 'familiar compound ghost' whose presence haunts the twenty-first century; the father whose influence has to be destroyed. And *Hamlet* in particular is the work that has to be resisted, fractured and dissipated in order to clear a space for the new.

Hamlet the Dane

The story of Hamlet, or Amleth, dates back beyond the twelfth century to a time when story and myth, history and legend, were indistinguishable. It can be found in the Latin *Historiae Danicae* of Saxo Grammaticus, printed

in 1514, which contains the basic structure of Shakespeare's dramatic action. Amleth's father, who had defeated the king of Norway in a duel, is murdered by his brother Feng, who then marries the widow Gerutha. Amleth feigns madness to avert suspicion: his sanity is tested by having a 'fair woman' put in his way. He kills an eavesdropping friend of Feng's and harangues his mother for marrying her husband's murderer. He is sent to England with two companions who carry a secret letter to the king demanding Amleth's death; he turns the tables on them by altering the letter to an instruction for their execution. He returns to Denmark and exacts his revenge by killing Feng. He convinces the people his conduct has been appropriate and that he is the rightful king, and they then accept him as their ruler. A secondary source is a translation of Saxo into French by François de Belleforest in his *Histories Tragiques* (1570).

These sources of Shakespeare, more familiar to students of *Hamlet* than to general readers, have become new sources for millennial fiction writers engaged in remaking the play for modern readers. It is as if the entry into a third millennium has sent writers back to the first in order to make sense of the second. The following pages discuss three novels that offer a report on some mutations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that push the play inexorably back toward its ancient Scandinavian roots: John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius* (2001), my own creative-critical experiment, *The Prince of Denmark* (Holderness 2001), and Hallgrímur Helgason's *101 Reykjavík* (2002).

Before *Hamlet*

John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius* is to some degree a prequel to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The novel ends not by closing itself down but by closing in on the inception of *Hamlet* (not the opening scene with Horatio and the soldiers on the battlements of Elsinore, but rather with the first scene involving Claudius and Gertrude – Act 1 scene 2). Nonetheless, in terms of the span of its action, Updike's novel does not stray far beyond the parameters prescribed by Shakespeare's play. *Hamlet*, in its constant allusions and parallels, and its interweaving of past, present and future, covers a period stretching from Hamlet's birth on the day of his father's victory over 'old' Fortinbras, to an adumbrated future where 'young' Fortinbras becomes King of Denmark and only Horatio survives to tell dead Hamlet's story. Even the first thirty pages of the novel, which narrate the courtship and marriage of Gertrude and Claudius, are woven from suggestions made from within the play, as well as details derived from the common sources, cited by Updike in his Preface as Saxo Grammaticus and Belleforest.

Nonetheless, although the novel's action pivots on the same seminal event as that which drives the play – Claudius's murder of 'old' Hamlet and his subsequent marriage to his brother's widow – it interfaces directly with *Hamlet* only at the very end, where a sudden and unprecedented formal deployment of Shakespearean quotation engineers a deliberate overlap between novel and drama. For the rest, Updike, like Tom Stoppard in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, lets his imagination play freely in the interstices of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, giving definition and resolution to those aspects of the story about which the play is reticent or ambiguous.

Such speculative revision is the novel's precondition, since it is a 'film noir' tale of an adulterous liaison ending in murder. That this is a liberal inference from the text is suggested by the fact that there is nothing in the play, not even from Hamlet himself, to explicitly accuse Gertrude of betrayal prior to her husband's death; even though the identification of Gertrude as 'concubine' to Fengon (Claudius) was one of the very few changes Belleforest made to Saxo's narrative. For Updike, who interestingly synthesises a sceptical modern view of marriage with parallels drawn from the mediaeval romance of adultery, this would be the obvious explanation for what happens in *Hamlet*.

Naturally, then, this is *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark; throughout the novel Hamlet himself is an absent or shadowy presence. Even when the action directs him to be on stage, the narrative never enters his consciousness (except briefly at the novel's conclusion) but always holds him objectively at a distance. His birth is Gertrude's labour (pp. 33–4), his childhood her alienation from motherhood in a patriarchal society (p. 35). As a young man he is seen by Gertrude as seeking his father's company and shunning hers (pp. 53–4). By Part II he is absent in Wittenberg, and at the opening of Part III we see Claudius demanding his return to Denmark (p. 163). By this stage a guilty and haunted Gertrude has begun to perceive her son as a threat, while Claudius hopes to win him over with courtly diplomacy. Only in the closing pages, as the action is about to dovetail with Shakespeare's play, is the figure of Hamlet granted consciousness and the power of direct speech (though naturally the words he uses are not 'his' [that is, Updike's], but Shakespeare's):

The Prince from beneath his clouded brow studied the two glowing middle-aged faces hung like lanterns before him – hateful luminaries' fat with satisfaction and health and continued appetite. He tersely conceded, to shunt away the glare of their conjoined pleas, "I shall in all my best obey you." (p. 210)

The child thus remains external to his mother's emotional life and to her relationships. But Updike is not just 'saving' the prince for his afterlife in Shakespeare's play, or tactfully avoiding any indiscreet treading on Bardic toes. Through Hamlet's constitutive absence Updike constructs the character of the prince as his mother perceives him: attached to his father, never close to her; a reproach to her for her failure to love her husband; a source of shame compounding the guilt of her adultery; and, finally, a real source of danger, as she finds herself newly queened but haunted by the presence of her dead husband and beginning to suspect some foul play in the manner of his demise. By these means Updike shapes a character readily imaginable as Shakespeare's Hamlet; but he is also a character who sits easily within Ernest Jones's Freudian analysis, which is in any case slyly prefigured in the novel:

"He blames himself, I believe, for his father's death", Claudius smoothly explained. "He feels he willed it, in desiring you." (p. 166)

Thus far it appears that Updike has brought Shakespeare up to date by laying alongside *Hamlet* another exquisitely crafted study of suburban sexuality and the frailty of the American (or rather Danish) dream. And at one level the tale is certainly a conventional romance of adultery. Old Hamlet is a conventional hero and politician, vigorous and caring but dull and insensitive. He falls asleep before consummating the marriage (p. 25). His absorption into kingship is accompanied by a wasting of personality:

The public self he had developed felt to her so wearisomely hollow. Kingship had gutted the private man even in a nightgown. (pp. 53–4)

In middle age he becomes – at least in her eyes – fat, balding, pompous and unattractive. Like a modern woman trapped in a constraining marriage, Gertrude sees herself as incarcerated in a mediaeval castle that comes to symbolise the restrictions of patriarchy. Denmark is a prison, not to the melancholy prince, but to his mother:

"Elsinore has been a dungeon to me ever since I watched my father die within it." (p. 94)

Her life as appraised through this inward eye had been a stone passageway with many windows but not one portal leading out. (p. 56)

Her *crie de coeur* is for liberation, self-fulfillment, release: "When ... do I serve the person I carry within?" (p. 94). Into this vulnerable relationship comes Feng [Claudius], suave and courtly, a soldier of fortune rather than a pillar of the state. He is dark against his brother's northern whiteness (like Othello, he woos Gertrude with tales of the dangers he had passed).

He appears as an eloquently seductive hedonist beside the stiffly conventional husband. A true 'new man,' he listens to his sister-in-law: 'She was unused to a man she could talk to' (p. 52). Gertrude invites seduction, virtually demanding the conventional gifts and love-talk; finally, Claudius proves himself as both romance hero and courtly lover by awakening the middle-aged wife's sleeping beauty:

In their hours of stolen intimacy, Fengon [Claudius] discovered to her in the white mirror of his own body, furred and pronged, a self laid up within her inner crevices and for forty-seven years merely latent, asleep. (p. 129)

Their joint betrayal discovered by the husband, Claudius moves to murder with such swift unpremeditated decision that the assassination seems virtually a *crime passionnel*.

Of course Updike is conscious of this convergence of his imagined tale with the patterns of conventional romance. This awareness is foregrounded by continual references to early mediaeval romance literature, especially the poetry of the French troubadours, and by the ultimate beaching of the romance idyll itself onto the sterile shore of a new, but distinctly *déjà vu*, marriage. In addition, however, there is a careful historicizing of the narrative, which is imitated from Shakespeare but used to suggest vicissitude and repetition, transformation and recurrence, in human relationships and human destinies.

Updike draws attention to this historicity by dividing the novel into three parts and changing the names of the characters with each structural transition. Thus in Part I Gertrude, Hamlet senior and Claudius are given their names from Saxo Grammaticus: Gerutha, Horwendil and Feng. In Part II they become Geruthe, Horvendile and Fengon, as in Belleforest's translation. Only in Part III do they assume their Shakespearean names. Similarly, the prince mutates from Amleth to Hamblet to Hamlet. The shifting nomenclature provides a sense of fragmentation proper to a story constructed (as was Shakespeare's) from diverse narrative sources, but also neatly justifying Updike's liberty of adaptation. It also hints at a modern sense of time as discontinuity rather than smooth serial progression. This technique aptly emulates the broad historical lines of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which, with characteristic concentration, enacts a rapid transition from a heroic mediaeval Denmark to a European renaissance state. But it also reinforces the underlying sense of characters caught in a predetermined action over which they have no ultimate control. Whatever their aspirations or motives, these are people trapped in a denouement which will produce – as an inevitable outcome – suspicion, discovery, murder, usurpation, haunting and revenge: in short, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

All this is focused in Part III, where the erstwhile lover has become the husband, the prodigal younger brother the king; he begins to seem, in Gertrude's eyes, curiously indistinguishable from his predecessor.

Even in their privacy he spoke as if there were others about them. (p. 164)

Of a particularly sententious observation from Claudius, she remarks on the similarity to her husband: 'Hamlet used to say just that' (p. 193). Elsinore remains a prison, now haunted by the ghost of its murdered king (p. 193). Gertrude's anxiety and foreboding swell as Claudius's confidence grows. 'Something' she confides to him 'will not rest' (p. 196). His closing emotions are of complacent self-satisfaction: 'He had gotten away with it. All would be well' (p. 211).

The novel ends with dramatic irony in a silence already occupied by a ghost, 'some passing emanation' (p. 194). But if *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, then history is merely repetition, an endless cycle of desire and disenchantment. The novel of betrayal, adultery and murder merely prepares the way for a drama of treachery, incest and revenge.

Prince of Denmark

Like that of Updike, my own novel *The Prince of Denmark* (Holderness 2001) also attempts to mediate between the Scandinavian world historicized by Saxo and Belleforest, and the Renaissance Europe fictionalized by Shakespeare. As many critics have shown, Shakespeare's play pivots on the continuities and conflicts between the pagan and heroic society of the *Historiae Danicae*, in which revenge for a father's murder is a clear and unproblematic obligation on a son, and the Christian nation-state of Hamlet's Denmark (or Shakespeare's England), where moral imperatives are far less clear-cut. Between Saxo and Shakespeare lay Belleforest's translation of 1570, which deliberately set the action back into the Dark Ages, and distanced the writer's own Christian ethos from the Viking world of blood feud and legitimate revenge. In Shakespeare's play the historical transition is imagined as a fault line between two generations and is formulated in persistent contrasts: between the heroic and hard-drinking world of 'old' Hamlet, and the sophisticated Renaissance culture of his son; the combat between 'old' Hamlet and 'old' Fortinbras, compared to the Machiavellian subterfuge of the duel between Hamlet and Laertes; 'old' Hamlet's taste for single combat, and Claudius's courtly diplomacy; the simplicity of the revenge ethic as imposed on Hamlet by the Ghost's command, and the complexities it entails when

translated into a new environment of Renaissance sovereignty and Christian forbearance.

The Prince of Denmark also seeks to explore the imaginable contiguity of these contrasting cultures by setting a sequel to the Hamlet story in an anachronistic eleventh-century Denmark where the new Christian faith co-exists with older pagan loyalties, and where the old heroic ethos has been subdued in favour of new conceptions of nationalism and of a progressive European culture. In this version 'old' Hamlet (Amléd) emerges from a culture of Viking violence in which conquest via single combat with 'old' Fortinbras (Fortenbrasse) is possible. But he appears as a king with a wiser and more far-sighted vision of Denmark's future, as a pacified nation capable of playing a role in the new European Christian Empire. Here the dispatching of Hamlet to university in Wittenberg is symptomatic of that progressive vision; the young prince prepares for rule by receiving an education in philosophy, politics and religious study rather than a training in warfare and generalship.

In *The Prince of Denmark*, the older heroic culture is contextualized by the presence of parenthetical extracts from Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic sources, which amplify cultural and historical contrasts developed from the sources as well as from suggestions in Shakespeare's play. The heroic ethic is represented, for instance, by extracts from *The Battle of Maldon* and the *Volsungasaga*, and by a fictionalized heroic lay celebrating the victory of Amléd over Fortenbrasse. The new cultural conditions of the Later Middle Ages and Renaissance are depicted in narrative, dialogue and description; in the mental reflections of Amléd and Polonius; and in the improvised relationship of Hamlet and Ofelia. But it is articulated particularly in a completion of Hamlet's Wittenberg diary (the 'tables' mentioned in the play), a personal record which traces his intellectual development from mediaeval scholasticism to a Reformation philosophy that in turn radicalizes his views on sovereignty, nationhood and government. (In what is perhaps the novel's longest stretch of the imagination, Hamlet is taught at Wittenberg by the Protestant university's actual Doctor of Bible, Martin Luther.)

In this re-fictionalization of the Hamlet legend, then, Amléd has carefully prepared for the succession of a son who is fully equipped with the education necessary to 'carry on the work of modernizing Denmark and bringing it into the new Europe not as a poor relation but as a nation of power and influence' (p. 41). The murder of Amléd by Claudius, who had clearly hoped for election himself in his due turn, aborts this plan, leaving Denmark under Norwegian military occupation and Horatio charged with

the responsibility of telling Hamlet's story. The novel then extrapolates the action forward by another generation, imagining the birth of a son to Hamlet and Ofelia, a child who is spirited away and hidden among monks on the island of Lindisfarne far from the Norwegian threat. After the dying queen informs Horatio of the child's existence, he devotes his life to finding the boy.

Here the novel twists the key historical contrast of the play into another loop, since Horatio's plan is to find the child, apprise him of the circumstances of his father's death, reunite him with the Danish army in exile, and restore him to the throne by overthrowing Fortinbras. In place of Hamlet's vision of a new Denmark, we find a repetition of the revenge ethic and a planned restoration of heroic and military values. Horatio imposes on the young prince (given the name Sigurd to define his destiny by reference to Scandinavian mythology) a command to revenge and restore that is parallel to the Ghost's injunction given earlier to his father. Horatio is depicted as one whose education has not dislodged a deep imaginative commitment to pagan and heroic values, symbolized in his dream of *Ragnar Roker*, the twilight of the gods (pp. 60–1).

But Sigurd's monastic education has developed a stage further, and he is thoroughly imbued with a Christian ethos (he is seen reading the Lindisfarne Gospels). Although an attempt is made to re-educate him into heroic values via Scandinavian mythology, his imagination, active in a series of vivid dreams, remains divided between pagan violence and Christian forgiveness. The dreams give expression to the seductive romanticism of heroic chivalry but also to the deeper interpellation of a Christian vocation. The action climaxes with Sigurd meeting his father's spirit on the battlements of Elsinore and receiving from him not an injunction to revenge but a gospel of peace, the *mandatum* given by Christ to his apostles at the Last Supper. The novel ends with his declining to kill Fortinbras and disappearing out to sea into a self-imposed and unexplained exile. The persistence of historical and cultural conflict is suggested by three separate eyewitnesses who respectively perceive his exit as either ignominious defeat, chivalric scorn or Christian resignation. The novel ends with an ambiguity of resolution, expressed in the language of *Beowulf*:

But nobody knew, in absolute truth – neither the crafty counsellor in court, nor the brave hero beneath the blue sky – who, at the last, unloaded that cargo. (p. 228)

The modernity of *The Prince of Denmark* is more aesthetic and theoretical than sexual and social. The novel is a postmodern palimpsest of texts.

Initially it is parasitic on the master-text of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, imitating its language, repeating some of its action, filling in some of its silences, extrapolating a denouement from its manifold narrative possibilities. But Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is also, like *King Lear*, a palimpsest of sources, and the novel goes back behind the play to reinstate the story in its mediaeval and Scandinavian context. I have already mentioned the citations of heroic literature, but there are many other parenthetical extracts. These are taken from sources such as the *Nibelungenleid* and the *Laxdaela Saga*, which provide imaginative romance motifs for the story of Ofelia; Old English poems such as *The Wanderer* and *Bede's Death Song*, which adumbrate a context of exile and pilgrimage; and passages from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which offer historical and philosophical parallels to aspects of the novel's action.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* also makes much use of texts – diplomatic embassies, a diary, love-letters, books, play-scripts, ballads and especially letters, some of which are mentioned (Claudius to the king, Polonius to Laertes), others quoted (Hamlet to Ophelia, Claudius, and Horatio). Such texts are adduced in the play as evidence, yet their meaning is invariably hotly disputed. They are employed to define and resolve, but they only disrupt and confuse. Not only are such texts open to free interpretation, they are also iterable. The classic instance here is Hamlet's alteration of the letters carried by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to England, perverted from their initial meaning, converted into a missive bearing exactly the opposite of its intended significance. Strategic recontextualizing is also evident in Hamlet's adaptation of the play on the sack of Troy, and strategic rewriting in *The Murder of Gonzago*. In general the written and quoted texts within the dramatic text are presented almost as models of post-structuralist instability and hermeneutic failure, as when Claudius declines to react to the dumb-show that graphically illustrates his crime. They are no more effective in securing sure communication, or in ordering the world, than are the deeply ambiguous and disruptive verbal messages of the Ghost, or the mad Ofelia's disjointed speech, or indeed Hamlet's Saxo-based 'antic disposition.'

The Prince of Denmark deploys some of these same texts, as quotation and as narrative, and invents additional documents to perform similar functions. The letters quoted in *Hamlet* are augmented and recontextualized (for example, the letters for England, the true and the forged, are presented in full); but here are new letters that did not find their way into the text of *Hamlet*: a letter from 'old' Fortenbrasse to Amled, a sequence of letters filling out the story of Ofelia, and critically a letter from Fortinbras to Laertes which throws new light on Hamlet's death. Other documents

represented as interior texts include real and fictional literary works and invented state papers (we see Horatio, for example, compiling minutes of the council meeting that elects Fortinbras king). A heroic poem, composed within the action by a *scop* to celebrate Amled's defeat of Fortenbrasse, and later perused by Hamlet's son as a written work, is set alongside a mythological account of the funeral of the slain god Balder.

Text destabilizes and discomposes; writing disintegrates and deconstructs. But to a purpose: to disclose a truth that insists on being told and retold, modified and revised, adapted and reconstructed: 'Tell my story.'

Hamlet in Reykjavik

My last example, *101 Reykjavik* by Hallgrímur Helgason, is an example of *Hamlet* reclaimed by a Scandinavian novelist. Reclaimed not only from Shakespeare, who took *Hamlet* out of Denmark, but from the kind of European Modernism exemplified by Enquist. The novel was published in Iceland in 1996 and in English in 2002. Let me start with a sample passage of description:

Reykjavik on a dark winter morning: a small town in Siberia.

Snow drifting in the glow of the lamp posts under a dome of darkness, enshrouding a shivering salted sea of porridge and shorelines of milk curds.

Masticated frozen mush around the darkness. The mountains – heaps of ancient debris, forsaken refuse, a junkyard from heathen times, scrap iron from the bronze age.

Hardened glacial diarrhoea, hideous mounds of mould, encircle this transient town of cards, a camping site littered with computers doomed to disappear in the next blackout.

Two-story concrete houses, cracked walls and fractured facades. The gardens full of frozen trees and brittle branches waiting to snap under the weight of a bird that never comes. A manless, leafless, birdless, insect-free ghost town where even the dead desperately cling to the clothes lines, lashed by contemptuous blasts and wicked winds. (p. 31)

The narrator of this sardonic but poetic picture is the novel's hero (for want of a better word). Hlynur Bjorn is a 33-year-old unemployed man who depends on social security and lives with his mother. He spends his days sleeping in, smoking, watching porn and game shows on TV, surfing the internet, masturbating and waiting for his mother to come home from work. At night he trawls the bars and clubs of Reykjavik with his equally feckless friends, drinking and taking drugs, having sex he doesn't enjoy with girls he quickly runs a mile from. His confined world, which he never leaves for long, is the postal district of 101 Reykjavik.

A very unlikely hero, though a very contemporary one. The reader is not given the opportunity of judging this Icelandic slacker objectively, however, as the whole narrative is conducted subjectively from his point of view. In fact it is a stream-of-consciousness novel that merges an introverted, solipsistic inner world with a detailed local topography of Reykjavik comparable with James Joyce's Dublin. You could easily follow in Hlynur's footsteps, or organize a 101 Reykjavik tour.

The local habitation and concrete detail are perceived through the distorting lens of Hlynur's mind. To cite just one example, Hlynur attaches a price in brackets to every woman he sees: how much he would pay to sleep with her. The tariff is usefully summarised at the back of the book. Prices range from Pamela Anderson (4.7 million kroner) to 'the woman at the job centre' (750). This misogyny is extended to a geographical misanthropy: Iceland is thoroughly and pervasively ridiculed as an abandoned ice-floe at the edge of the world: 'Iceland is a wind-beaten asshole, and Icelanders are the lice on its edge' (p.178). But the reader gets this perspective through the crude, infantile, nihilistic, misogynist, misanthropic perversity of a seriously deranged man. It's hard therefore to take his excoriating, scatological travesty of Iceland seriously as a social critique.

Hlynur's imagination is much larger than his physical existence. He is aware, from TV and the internet, of what's happening around the world, but it's a world in which Iceland seems insignificant; sometimes it doesn't even appear on TV weather maps. Reykjavik is travestied as a place where there is nothing to do; Hlynur is entirely at home there, as he makes it clear he is pretty much incapable of doing anything at all. Unsurprisingly, therefore, very little happens in the novel in the way of action. Hlynur's mother comes out as a lesbian and forms a union with Lolla. Hlynur has sex with his girlfriend Hofy, as well as with Lolla. Both become pregnant, possibly by him. He steals one of his married sister's birth-control pills, and she gets pregnant too. The sister and the girlfriend both lose their babies, while Lolla gives birth successfully. Hlynur meets his Hungarian chat-room girlfriend and finds she is already engaged. He discovers one of his gay friends is HIV positive, so he has unprotected sex with a prostitute in Amsterdam, hoping to catch AIDS himself. He doesn't. Wandering aimlessly to a party in the country, he gets lost in a lava-field and comes close to death from exposure. The novel ends with Hlynur living apparently contentedly with his mother, her partner and their baby.

That's it. There can be few novels in which so little of consequence actually occurs, but the style in which this apparently random and inconclusive current of consciousness is realized is electrifying. It is intelligent, inclusive,

witty, poetic and above all hilariously funny. There's a sheer enjoyment of linguistic excess, a delight in word-play, comparable to Antony Burgess or Robert Nye; at the same time it has a poet's capacity to realise emptiness, vacancy, solitude and fragility, comparable only to Samuel Beckett.

The novel was very well received and praised for the kind of features I have described. There is no trace, however, in any of the publisher's descriptions, or the press reviews and notices, of the name Shakespeare. Yet *101 Reykjavik* is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and is pervaded throughout by allusions to the play. Hlynur's father and mother are separated. He has incestuous fantasies about his mother, and has not seen his father for a long time. A friend has seen Hlynur's father at a bar called 'The Castle.'

'Are you sure it was him?'

'I know old greybeard when I see him'.

'How did he look?'

'Kind of third-dayish ... he spoke about your mother a lot ... you should look him up. You know ... how about tonight?'

'What time were you there?'

'Kind of one-ish'. (p. 6)

No ghost needs to come from the grave to identify this as a concise summary of a dialogue in Act One scene 2 of *Hamlet*. When Hlynur meets his father at the castle, the latter looks like a ghost and warns Hlynur that his ex-wife is a lesbian and about to seal a homosexual partnership with Lolla. In a parody of the Ghost's message to Hamlet, Hlynur's ghostly father suggests that Hlynur's mother is betraying both by choosing a new (female) partner. Hlynur has two gay friends called Rosy and Guildy, who hang around the Rosenkrantz café and who have been to see a show called *Omelette*. One wears a t-shirt with the inscription 'To me or not to me' (p. 68). They recite a song from the show: 'Hamlet lives in Reykjavik and smokes his Danish Prince' (p. 52) – Prince being a brand of cigarettes. Hlynur calls his Grannie 'Elise Elsinore (or Helsingor)', playing on Shakespeare's Anglicization of the Danish castle. He tells his girl-friend Hofy that it will 'cost her a groaning to take off his edge.' He has speeches that directly parody passages from *Hamlet*, such as a diatribe against female cosmetics. Walking down the street he finds himself using Shakespeare's words – 'In the fatness of these pury times' (p. 124) – and wonders where on earth the words come from. When he steals his sister's birth-control pill (thus causing her to become pregnant), he apostrophises it as if it were Yorick's skull:

I scrutinise it. Hold it before me, like Mel Gibson in *Hamlet* holding up that skull, and talking to it in his highfalutin English ... But this is the other way round. I'm talking to the death that precedes life, the obstacle, blocking

its path ... Alas, poor Yorick, behold this speck. This is life. Our lives are worth nothing more than this forgotten pill, and yet everyone's out there trying to turn this thing into something meaningful and eternal. Divine intervention or blind chance? Wonder or blunder? Yeah. Me. Introducing in the role of God: Hlynur Bjorn. I clasp the pill between my fingers, holding it up to my eye, to see if I can discern a facial expression, a twitch in the mouth or a smile. Smile now if you can, smile to your god, you pathetic little speck. (p. 103)

Here Helgason uses the iconic moment from Shakespeare to explore Hlynur's fundamental problem: the desire of impotence for power. With his god-like power over life and death, Hlynur assumes some of the authority of the Shakespearean image, Hamlet looking through the eyes of the skull at those same great mysteries.

But why? What has this story of a modern Icelandic slacker to do with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? Hlynur is no one of importance; he is given no compelling command from beyond the grave; there is nothing in the novel about history, or politics, or a heroic and tragic destiny. Lisa Hopkins suggests that the novel's indebtedness to Hamlet is 'the central joke' of the novel since Hlynur is 'both extraordinarily like Hamlet in temperament and situation and yet, in a way that the novel itself presents as part of the essence of Hamletism, also so self-obsessed that he does not know so. Instead, he drifts through a series of Hamletesque situations thinking only of how they affect himself, without ever registering either that others are also involved or that his "self" is in fact constructed and conditioned by external powers and precedents' (Hopkins 2008, 142). But there's more to it than this.

The very few actions taken by Hlynur in the novel are actions of revenge: against women, against himself and against Iceland. He wishes away the baby he may have fathered with Hofy, who has an abortion. He causes his sister's pregnancy by stealing her birth control pill, knowing she wants no more children. In the most bizarre episode of the book, he pays a self-styled shaman to terminate Lolla's pregnancy remotely (an experiment that fails). And he tries to kill himself by contracting AIDS. He is not Prince Hamlet, but he has clearly taken on board the repressive injunction of his ghostly alcoholic father and does all he can to wreck his mother's lesbian marriage with Lolla.

Ultimately he comes to realise that his mother is in fact his only real link with life, and she represents nothing less than his city and his island. He looks at her as she comes into the apartment:

Mom. The imports officer. The everyday hero, stands there, strong but tired, with her two plastic bags, in the twilight of her life, having walked the downtown mush, the brownish mix of sleet and dirt, stands there like a

whole infrastructure: with her varicose veins, wheeling tracks around her neck, the appendix jammed with traffic, heart pumping red lights, dead policemen around her waist, ambulances wailing in her stomach, around a whole mall of intestines, the crowded colon, escalators, hallways, lobbies, passageways, corridors and tunnels, but beneath all this, behind all this, the warmth, the over-complicated central heating system of motherly warmth. No snow can ever settle on Mom and her heart never freezes. Her soul is a sunny square, and you'll always find a parking space in those eyes.

Mom. Is a city. A whole city. My holy city. As great as a city. A city of 100,000. (pp. 235–6)

Which is of course Reykjavik itself. The mother is the city is the island.

Icelanders no longer have to shack up in old farm huts, and can now move about in climate-controlled pink cars ... but they're still recovering from thousands of years of goosebumps ... eternally cold. They force their children to sleep out of doors for the first five years of their lives to make sure the chill takes its hold. Always ready with that frozen sneer, those cold sarcastic replies. But there's earthly warmth below that crust. They're not totally heartless. There's always someone there to think of you. Even if you're paralytically drunk and sprawled over frozen vomit on the sidewalk in the middle of the night with nothing but snow in your pockets ... Even then there's some girl who'll stop over you. Who'll talk to you. Who'll wake you up. Who'll take care of you. (pp. 178–9)

Hlynur's dependence, his helplessness and hopelessness appear to be a way of testing the absolute, unconditional hospitality of a society always prepared in the last instance to share a little warmth, to help someone when he's down, to find the lost sheep. However hard he tries, Hlynur cannot make himself so unlovable, annoying, insufferable, dangerous that he will be rejected: by Iceland, by Reykjavik, or by his mother.

Beyond Modernism

These three millennial adaptations of *Hamlet* – one American, one British, one Icelandic – are quite different from one another, but they share a common agenda. Each version is an attempt to recreate *Hamlet* for modern readers, by simultaneously pushing it back into its own remote past and by drawing out from it social and psychological issues – sexual, religious, cultural – of immediate relevance to the present day.

Where Modernism typically fragmented the play, these novels tend to enlarge and supplement it: looking before and after, in the form of the prequel, sequel, aftermath. Each approaches *Hamlet* in a sophisticated, educated and above all knowing way, demonstrating and displaying

familiarity with the historical background and with the play's sources. The writers also incorporate scholarly and critical ideas and problems, alluding to the play's textual instability or to the critical debates that have surrounded its history of interpretation.

John Updike reviews the cultural evidence presented in *Hamlet*, reiterating and clarifying Shakespeare's own implicit model of the historical change from a Scandinavian warrior society to the culture of the Renaissance. Like a historian reviewing and reassessing familiar evidence, he represents the *Hamlet* story as a family saga informed by modern views on history, marriage, the position of women. But the novel also self-consciously deals not just directly with Shakespeare, but also indirectly with critical debates about historiography, culture, masculinity. His story is above all the story of Gertrude: her youth, marriage, disenchantment with her dull husband, seduction by his worldly younger brother. Using both historic sources and modern criticism, he steps outside Prince Hamlet's own poisoned horror of adultery and incest and reorient Gertrude's story as a sympathetic tale of a trapped and bored woman, seeking outside her arranged marriage the liberty and sexual fulfillment she is denied within it.

The Prince of Denmark approaches the play from the perspective of historical and textual scholarship, making much use of, and play with, texts and their meanings. In the novel such texts serve to rebuild the archaeological layers of cultural change that lie between us and the myth and history *Hamlet* articulates and evokes. They help to complicate the legendary record and lay it open to interpretation, as in the prefatory extract from an adapted history, 'The Chronicle of Ansgar,' which offers a particular and, at first sight, idiosyncratic view of the events of Shakespeare's play. And they permit the development of a complex and multiple consciousness within the characters themselves, as in Horatio's openness to both Christian and pagan influences, a contradiction that is re-enacted and finally resolved by the young prince. At one point Sigurd reads, side by side, the opening of St John's Gospel and the Old English elegy *The Wanderer*. Both strike at his imagination and form the basis for the destiny he finally chooses, though his choice may be less an embracing of Christian commitment than a revulsion from the violence of the past. The dragon Fafnir, in the old legend slain by Siegmund, becomes the dragon of Revelation. But the heroic militarism employed to destroy both remains ambivalent and ethically problematical for an imaginary post-heroic generation.

Helgason's novel inverts the ideological pattern of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in which the patriarchal mandate is the supreme law, and affirms an alternative, matriarchal identity for the Icelander. This is of course an

operation of some cultural significance in a society in which people carry the patronymic, the name of the father; it is especially significant since the story of Hamlet, which Shakespeare knew from Saxo Grammaticus as part of the *Gesta Danorum*, the deeds of the Danes, appears to have been originally an Icelandic legend. There is a common source, much older than Shakespeare, upon which the contemporary Icelandic writer can confidently draw and which he can boldly and innovatively adapt.

Taken together, these examples show something of the freedom and flexibility available to the twenty-first-century novelist when engaging with Shakespeare. The freedom to reinvent and re-create; the freedom to privilege the lives of lesser rather than greater characters; the freedom to infuse into fiction contemporary concerns of class, race, gender and sexuality. Novelists will go on taking advantage of these freedoms well beyond the limitations of this tiny sample. But the millennium is still only a teenager, and there is much more to be done.

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