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Narration and staging in *Hamlet* and its afternovels

In [genre fiction], the relationship between individual work and formula is somewhat analogous to that of a variation on a theme, or of a performance to a text. To be a work of quality or interest, the individual version of a formula must have some unique or special characteristics of its own, yet these characteristics must ultimately work toward the fulfillment of the conventional form. In somewhat the same way, when we see a new performance of a famous role like *Hamlet*, we are most impressed by it if it is a new but acceptable interpretation of the part. An actor who overturns all our previous conceptions of his role is usually less enjoyable than one who builds on the interpretations we have become accustomed to. But if he adds no special touches of his own to the part we will experience his performance as flat and uninteresting.¹

[Cawelti] compares the publication of a new detective story by a talented mystery writer with a successful revival of *Hamlet*; in each case the public wants the new work to exhibit some special character of its own without violating the familiar original form.²

This comparison between popular fiction and stage revivals, which John Cawelti makes in 1976, and which George Dove reworks in 1990, equates the predictable conventions of genre fiction with the familiar contours of Shakespeare’s play, the excellent fiction of the “talented mystery writer” with the renewed performance of Shakespeare’s well-known characters. While the comforts of genre fiction emerge from its familiar, sometimes Shakespearean forms, its potential artistic value derives from the “special character of its own.” The impulse to yoke Shakespeare, and particularly *Hamlet*, with popular fiction recurs in criticism as well as the novels themselves. One concern then becomes how these collusions between narrative and performance, between novel and theatre, employ the original form and, without violating it, establish their “special character.” Another equally important issue, invoked by Cawelti’s persistent metaphor, is why Shakespearean performance is so deeply implicated in popular fiction.

The temptation to narrate Shakespeare is long-standing, starting with the well-known apocryphal tales of his composition of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* because the Queen requested a play about Falstaff in love, the speculations about his relationship with Anne Hathaway deriving from his
bequest of the “second-best” bed to her, and the old story of Shakespeare’s expulsion from Arden for poaching the king’s deer. Such tales enter the fabric of twentieth-century novels, when, for example, Mrs. Shakespeare tells her own tale about her husband’s fecklessness in Robert Nye’s *Mrs. Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (1993) or Leon Rooke narrates Shakespeare’s flight from Arden from his hound’s perspective in *Shakespeare’s Dog* (1981). However, the history of novelistic adaptations of Shakespeare is considerably more multifaceted.

In the early 1800s, the storytelling surrounding Shakespeare moved beyond historical anecdote into published fiction, like Robert Folkestone Williams’s *1838 Shakespeare and His Friends*, which actually recounts Queen Elizabeth’s command that Shakespeare write *Merry Wives*. Other authors began to draw on Shakespeare’s plays for narrative, especially for youthful audiences, as Charles and Mary Lamb did in their *1810 Tales from Shakespeare*. While novels like Charles Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–39) incorporated Shakespearean staging in their plots, Mary Cowden Clarke’s novellas elaborated the early lives of Shakespeare’s female characters in *The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines* (1851). By the mid-nineteenth century, there were four distinct modes of narrating Shakespeare: fictionalized bard biographies; simplified stories for young readers; character novels; and contextual narratives that invoke Shakespeare on stage. To this last category, we could add current novels that employ academic rather than theatrical Shakespearean contexts. Each of these narrative strategies promotes characteristics in fiction that merely staging the plays cannot, supposedly, supply.

For example, the enormous array of novels that follow *Shakespeare and His Friends* (1838) with fictionalized accounts of Shakespeare’s life all assume that Shakespeare himself is a mystery that the stage productions cannot resolve. Most often the “Friends” are crucial to the narrative. Seldom does Shakespeare’s perspective govern; much more frequently a child actor or a hapless apprentice or a fellow actor or even a dog drives the narrative perspective and fleshes out indirectly the relatively sparse biography of Shakespeare available. Shakespearean novels in this mode offer narration as the necessary substitute for the unavailable, constantly re-imagined staging of his life.

In *Tales from Shakespeare* (1810), the Lambs’ strategies suggest that narrative can sort out, clarify, and thus simplify Shakespeare’s characters and their actions. The Lambs offered children, particularly girls, early access to Shakespeare with *Tales* that present an explanatory, omniscient narration even as they abbreviate the plots. Although most critics would dismiss the idea that narrative is intrinsically less complex and difficult to understand
than staged drama, the purpose of the Lambs’ simplification – to intrigue youthful would-be Shakespearean readers – remains a cogent purpose for narration in current popular fiction. While radical simplification now resides chiefly in lavishly illustrated Shakespeare-for-children picture books, the use of narrative to lure young readers, especially teenagers, to Shakespeare pervades young adult fiction which, in turn, embraces author narratives, Shakespearean contexts, and character histories.

Mary Cowden Clarke’s novellas and subsequent Shakespearean character novels offer their readers insight into Shakespeare’s characters, usually through first-person or limited third-person narration. Following Cowden Clarke’s lead, recent writers often use the Shakespearean novel to explain the interior psychological motives of particular characters, like Gertrude in *Hamlet*, whose ambiguous staged behavior invites the novelist’s as well as the audience’s imaginations. Whereas the Lambs’ *Tales* imply that narration can simplify Shakespeare enough to make his plays accessible to young readers, Shakespearean character novels reflect the assumption that narration can flesh out the motivations and the history behind actions presented in merely “two-hours’ traffic of our stage” (*Romeo and Juliet*, Prol. 12).

Late twentieth- and twenty-first-century popular novelists also use Shakespeare as the occasion that informs their own plots. The novels that incorporate the plays as context – in stage productions or academe – position staging and teaching Shakespeare as apparently neutral contexts that very often become meaningful counterpoints to the central plot. Mystery fiction, in particular, subordinates theatre to narrative in ways that then, paradoxically, re-establish Shakespeare as key to recreating the narrative of the murder. From Michael Innes’s *Hamlet, Revenge* (1937), to P. M. Carlson’s *Audition for Murder* (1985), to David Rotenberg’s *The Hamlet Murders* (2004), Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* on stage situates the mystery. Innes’s Hamlet actor has indeed killed the person playing Polonius but for political reasons, the actress playing Ophelia in P. M. Carlson’s novel dies but did not commit suicide, and the murdered director of *Hamlet* in Rotenberg’s novel was killed by the actors playing Ophelia and Laertes, in part because he seduced “Ophelia.” While these novels treat Shakespearean performances as less important than the central narrative, the eternal return of the plays onstage yokes theatrical action with narrative’s ability to reveal psychologically complex motives.

The recent proliferation of Shakespearean novels in these several modes has provoked much contemporary criticism. As critics like Marianne Novy and Julie Sanders have pointed out, distinctive traditions of cross-cultural and gendered fictional reworkings of Shakespeare have emerged in the literary novel. In analyses of Shakespeare in genre fiction, Susan Baker has
explored how Shakespeare marks both social class and innocence in classic detective fiction, while Linda Charnes locates Shakespeare – and specifically *Hamlet* – as intimately linked with noir detectives. Martha Tuck Rozett explores how authors use fiction and drama in *Talking Back to Shakespeare*. In my work, I argue that contemporary romance novelists use Shakespeare to register complex class and gender tensions. These considerations of Shakespearean fiction typically pursue ideological readings of Shakespeare’s fictional deployment. Either Shakespeare himself or his constrained characters provoke appropriative responses that validate new artistry or expose ideological contexts.

However, the ideological stakes in narrating Shakespeare are only one aspect of popular fiction’s engagement with Shakespeare. The contending artistic powers of narration and drama are equally important to Shakespeare’s influence in popular genre fiction. *Hamlet*’s novelistic afterlives, especially in the flood of popular novels in the last fifteen years, explore provocatively the tensions between theatrical and narrative representation in all four modes: fictional reconstruction of Shakespeare’s life, young adult fiction, character novels, and Shakespearean contextual fiction. Recent fiction illuminates and exacerbates the tensions between narrative and theatre in these “familiar forms” of the Shakespeare novel, possibly due to increasing cultural tensions between literature/reading and media/watching performance.

The most important aspect of *Hamlet*, for my purposes, is its emphasis on the competition between narration and action, between telling a story and staging it. This play grapples with the same questions that popular fiction implicitly raises about the powers of narration: its access to individual point of view, its ability to sequence causes and effects, and its susceptibility to alternate versions and authorities. Telling a story imbeds it within a perspective, which has both limitations and advantages; staging an action yields perspective and judgment to an audience with necessarily multiple viewpoints. *Hamlet* offers several narrations; one, the ghost’s narration of his death, is obviously important while the others almost disappear in the text. However, taken together, these narratives reveal an unresolvable struggle between narrative and theatre that re-emerges within current Shakespearean popular fiction.

All storytelling within *Hamlet* illustrates both the advantages and deficiencies of narrative point of view. The ghost’s story, hedged around with his experiences in purgatory, reveals his clear bias against his brother Claudius, “that incestuous, that adulterate beast” (1.5.42). Surrounded by flourishes of personal perspective, his essential message is succinct: “The serpent that did sting thy father’s life / Now wears his crown” (1.5.39–40). However, Old Hamlet’s story is a counter-narrative from the start, challenging the current
report of his death: “‘Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard, / A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark / Is by a forged process of my death / Rankly abused” (1.5.35–38). From the beginning, the ghost reminds us that there is an alternative narrative, one that he deems false.

As the ghost elaborates his story, its perspectival details proliferate. After much commentary on Gertrude, the ghost senses the morning:

Brief let me be. Sleeping within my orchard,
My custom always in the afternoon,
Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole,
With juice of cursed hebenon in a vial,
And in the porches of my ears did pour
The leperous distilment; whose effect
Holds such an enmity with blood of man
That swift as quicksilver it courses through
The natural gates and alleys of the body,
And with a sudden vigour it doth posset
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
The thin and wholesome blood. So did it mine;
And a most instant tetter barked about,
Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust,
All my smooth body.
Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother’s hand
Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatch’d. (1.4.59–75)

Excluding the italicized commentary about his personal habits and about the poison’s effect on his body, the “brief” story takes only seven lines. The difficulties of perspective emerge in narrative excess. Old Hamlet is sleeping when the “leperous distilment” enters his ears, the poison has “sudden vigour,” and “a most instant tetter” covers his body with a “vile and loathsome crust.” This nicely specific forensic description creates a paradox. Given these features of the event, how does the sleeping king, instantly paralyzed, know who poisoned him? How, for that matter, does he know that he has been poisoned, given that the poison’s effects invoke the natural, if inexplicably swift, details of leprosy? The play pits Old Hamlet’s narrative against the story as “given out” and offers no explanation of his curious, contradictory narrative perspective: both asleep and awake, both dying instantly and alert to complex medical diagnosis. According to the narrative, Old Hamlet is dead before he can actually perceive the events that he recounts; like the story of his “natural death,” his narrative is post-mortem.

These odd narrative conflicts might be unremarkable, dismissible as a consequence of ghostly omniscience, if Gertrude’s narrations did not reveal comparable emotional bias and temporal confusions. When Gertrude describes her
son’s behavior in her closet, her narration does not match the scene that she has just experienced; though technically accurate, her account omits most of her interaction with her son and elides his responsibility, both by insisting on his madness and by omitting his name. The difficulties in her narrations become more obvious when she tells Laertes of his sister’s death. Her first account, like her husband’s, is brief: “One woe doth tread upon another’s heel, / So fast they follow. Your sister’s drowned, Laertes” (4.7.135–36). However, Gertrude’s subsequent description reveals more significant limitations in narrative perspective. Her lengthy narrative of how “an envious sliver broke” (4.7.145) works admirably as a story that justifies Ophelia’s burial in the churchyard and that might soften Laertes’s vengeful grief. At the same time these lines create difficulties comparable to those in the ghost’s narrative. Gertrude’s narrative is beautifully detailed, as if she were present. However, if she is watching, why does she not save Ophelia before “her garments, heavy with their drink, / Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay / To muddy death” (4.7.153–55)? After all, George Eliot’s hero in Daniel Deronda (1876) both witnesses and rescues his suicidal “Ophelia.” Gertrude’s failure to save a girl “incapable of her own distress” (4.7.150) is, at least, problematic.

Gertrude’s narration of the closet scene proves incomplete, self-serving, and exculpatory from a maternal perspective, as invested in personal perspective as Ophelia’s earlier account of Hamlet’s “lovesick” visit to her closet. Moreover, if Gertrude recounts Ophelia’s drowning as one present, she becomes partially guilty of the death through neglect. If she was not a direct, conscious witness, she reconstructs Ophelia’s drowning in the most palatable narrative possible to insure her some burial rites, although “her death was doubtful” (5.1.221). Both Ophelia and King Hamlet’s deaths become doubtful because of the ways that they occur within narration.

Partly because of the doubts that invested perspectives create, narration never fully succeeds in Hamlet; however, neither does theatre. The ghost’s vexed perspective prompts Hamlet to test the story by using theatre, specifically the players who inspire him with the speech he has requested: “One speech in it I chiefly loved: ’twas Aeneas’ tale to Dido, and thereabout of it especially where he speaks of Priam’s slaughter. If it live in your memory, begin at this line – let me see, let me see” (2.2.448–52). This performance of storytelling apparently motivates Hamlet’s decision to commission a staged version of his father’s narrative: “Dost thou hear me, old friend? Can you play the murder of Gonzago?” (3.2.539–40). However, which came first, the play Hamlet recalls or his ghost father’s narration of the same plot? A pre-existing play that Hamlet knows well and that closely resembles the ghost’s narrative significantly complicates the sequential relationship between narration and “actions that a man might play” (1.2.84).
Moreover, despite his plans to use the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* to gauge the all-important audience responses, Hamlet compulsively narrates. First, the dumb show performance collides with Hamlet’s summary: “This play is the image of a murder done in Vienna: Gonzago is the duke’s name; his wife, Baptista: you shall see anon; ’tis a knavish piece of work” (3.2.232–39). When the actors finally perform the murder, Hamlet again interjects his own narration: “He poisons him i’ the garden for’s estate. His name’s Gonzago: the story is extant, and writ in choice Italian: you shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago’s wife” (3.2.255–58). This troubled persistence of narrative and its presumed authority challenges the representational power of the play that Hamlet himself has requested. Whereas neither Old Hamlet nor Gertrude acknowledge the implicit conflicts in their narrative perspectives, Hamlet’s encounters with narration propel him into performance even while he challenges the performance he himself has designed by telling the story.

By the time the play reaches Hamlet’s final plea to Horatio, “Absent thee from felicity awhile; / And in this harsh world draw [his] breath in pain / To tell my story” (5.2.352–54), narration and theatrical performance are mutually compromised and functionally interdependent. narration promises secret truths beyond overt events and retrospective “truth” but falters because of limited individual perspectives; performance offers an open, current display of the actions but neglects “that within which passeth show” (1.2.85), especially the crucial motives of several characters. These narrative dynamics in *Hamlet*, which extend to the stories told by Ophelia, Gertrude, Claudius, and Horatio, are one crucial reason that this particular play has generated such a wide array of popular fiction.

In all four modes of Shakespearean fiction-making I offered at the beginning of this essay, *Hamlet* has served, either directly or indirectly, as an important “formula” through which Shakespearean novels explore the “special character” of the relationship between making stories and making theatre. Recent literary novels, young adult fiction, and murder mysteries all include illuminating negotiations with *Hamlet*. The structural contention between narrative and theatrical performance that literary novels present as “high art” to literate adult audiences, young adult fiction exposes in blatant terms to its adolescent readers. Taking up similar issues and strategies, detective fiction reframes most explicitly the dynamic interaction between narrating and staging as well as the problematics of perspective and sequence in narration because “detective fiction – with its streamlined structure, its emphasis on interpretation at all levels of plot and narration, and its peculiar focus on the writer and reader – represents narrativity in its purest form.”

Taken together, these three genres of Shakespearean
novel demonstrate how Shakespeare’s play continues to enable narrative in current popular fiction and how theatre still challenges the conditions of narrative.

The implied priority of perspective and resulting artistic power of narration anchor the numerous popular novels that pursue Shakespeare’s own identity. These fictions typically reveal both the “true” author of the plays and the deepest motivations and/or literary artistry of those pursuing the mystery. Recent literary novels like Sarah Smith’s *Chasing Shakespeares* (2003) and Alan Wall’s *School of Night* (2002) employ the mystery of who really wrote the plays as the key to their characters’ self-understanding. *Chasing Shakespeares* works through the class struggle and desire between Joe Roper, working-class graduate student who favors Shakespeare as the author despite his lower-class origins, and Posey Gould, the graduate student of privilege who favors the Earl of Oxford and finances their joint travels to London to verify – or debunk – the archival letter Joe has found wherein “WS” reveals de Vere’s authorship.

Like *Chasing Shakespeares*, Wall’s *School of Night* opens with a character stealing early modern documents. Wall’s Sean Tallow discovers as much about himself, his relationship to his friend Dan Pagett and the School of Night as he does about Shakespearean authorship. The narrator’s preoccupations with Shakespeare’s failure to leave any books in his will and his growing conviction that Christopher Marlowe wrote the plays finally provoke him to decode Ralegh’s encrypted text. As Ralegh supposedly puts it, Shakespeare is a “rainbow man.” When Sean investigates how Marlowe and his conspirators could have been controlling Shakespeare, he discovers that “[Shakespeare had] not been controlled by them; instead they’d been resurrected in him. He has taken his fire from their flames. And because he had been a nobody, the man from nowhere, he had been able to become everyone. Shakespeare was Shakespeare after all.”

As Tallow finds, his own apparent cowardice, smallness, and malleability in the face of his friend’s felonious daring resonates in Shakespeare, who can richly represent the dead voices because his own will does not intervene.

Novels in this mode, though not categorized as detective fiction, nonetheless treat Shakespeare as the mystery that generates their narratives and thus expose their own validation of narrative structure over staged performance. Martin Stephen’s historical mystery *The Conscience of the King* (2004) overtly plays out how Shakespearean author novels attempt to validate narrative over theatre. Even though the question of who wrote the plays matters less than tracking down the syphilitic former spy Kit Marlowe and King James’s all-too-revealing private letters, Sir Henry Gresham uncovers the secrets of Shakespeare’s authorship. The novel opens with a “literal”
rendition of *The Mousetrap* in *Hamlet* in which old Ben stands in for Shakespeare as the player-king of Hamlet’s dumb show and dies when the poison substituted by Kit Marlowe enters his ear instead of Shakespeare’s, as intended. In Stephen’s novel, Marlowe, after staging his death and escaping to France, has sent his plays back to England to be performed under Shakespeare’s name. Murderous and crazed with venereal disease, Marlowe returns to England to avenge himself on those who exiled him and to reclaim his reputation as a playwright, usurped by Shakespeare. Initially, the novel seems to offer the most conventional of explanations for Marlowe’s authorship beyond the grave, while establishing that Gresham’s narrative supersedes staged performance.

However, rather than presenting the single rival claimant and then elaborating one alternative narrative of Shakespeare’s artistry, Stephen’s novel peels off layers of potential authorship. Gresham discovers that the supposedly volatile letters he must recover are not the most crucial documents that Marlowe has stolen – he also took the original drafts of Shakespeare’s plays in their authors’ own hands. In Stephen’s second solution to the “authorship” mystery, Shakespeare has apparently functioned as the early modern equivalent of a nom de plume for several aristocratic would-be playwrights. Stephen’s novel thus authorizes all the rival playwrights proposed over the years and more: Kit Marlowe, Edward de Vere, Francis Bacon, Launcelot Andrews, the Countess of Pembroke (as the author of *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*), and even King James himself. These aristocrats and clergymen, eager to dabble in the new literary form but protective of their status, have used Shakespeare as their conduit to the stage and now risk scandalous exposure as playwrights. This compound conspiracy theory fully accounts for the enormous array of legal, medical, and political knowledge in Shakespeare’s plays, often cited as evidence he could not have written them. It also effectively raises the stakes for Gresham’s quest, already intensified by Marlowe’s personal hatred of Gresham.

Stephen moves beyond this gentle mockery of authorship conspiracy theories when Gresham actually recovers the documents, reads them, and realizes that the aristocratic pseudo-playwrights have written terrible, unstageable plays. Shakespeare has taken and transformed their work through his own linguistic and theatrical artistry. These authors may have supplied narratives, characters, details of law, religious doctrine, medicine, and current science in their fledgling works, but Shakespeare created their poetic beauty and their theatrical power. Ultimately, Gresham protects his aristocratic patrons and secures Shakespeare’s status as author by destroying both Marlowe and the drafts during the Globe production when Marlowe planned to claim the glory for himself.
As Stephen’s mystery demonstrates with its kaleidoscopic survey of possible authors for the plays and Gresham’s ultimate “rescue” of Shakespeare as playwright, such novels empower the hero/narrator and the newly established (or re-established) author of the plays simultaneously. In the contest between narrative and stage, the “author” novels validate the superiority and prior claims of an individual perspective and narrated history over the limited residue of William Shakespeare’s life. However, as Stephen’s novel also shows, such validated narrations paradoxically rely on the actual stage performances and must acknowledge fraudulent and therefore “staged” performances of Shakespearean authorship.

The mystery of Shakespeare’s identity also serves as a popular lure for teenaged readers of young adult fiction. For example, the pseudo-superhero adolescent of The Blue Avenger Cracks the Code (2000), like Sean in School of Night, deciphers the code of Shakespeare’s plays, but he discovers de Vere’s authorship. However, young adult author novels most often involve Elizabethan or time-traveling adolescents who discover Shakespeare or his surrogates within theatrical contexts. In A Question of Will (2000), by Lynne Kositsky, Perin Willoughby – known as Willow during her time at the Globe – uncovers de Vere’s authorship, persuades a fellow player to let everyone else know after de Vere’s death, and returns to the present to discover that everyone is now studying the world’s most famous author – Edward de Vere. In Gary Blackwood’s young adult novel, The Shakespeare Stealer (1998), a dictation-taking orphan named Widge becomes apprentice to Simon Bass and receives an unusual job: he must attend a play at the Globe Theatre and transcribe it word for word. This theft will benefit his master, who intends to stage the play with his own company. Thus piracy theories about the quartos of Shakespeare devolve onto an orphan who learned “charactery” from his first apprenticeship with an apothecary. Thwarted in his theft, first by the distractions of the play itself and later by a cutpurse who steals his tablet, Widge signs on as an apprentice with the company when they catch him searching for the missing document. Predictably he comes to value his new theatrical “family,” including the moody Shakespeare, more than he fears the punishments of his previous master. Shakespeare and the adolescent narrative perspective prove equally important.7

Blackwood’s hero follows a characteristic narrative arc from theatrical outsider to awkward actor/boy-actress to associate/friend of Shakespeare, the dominant pattern in much contextual Shakespearean fiction. Current young adult novels in this mode – J. B. Cheaney’s The Playmaker (2000) and The True Prince (2002), Gary Blackwood’s sequels, Shakespeare’s Scribe (2000) and Shakespeare’s Spy (2003), Susan Cooper’s King of Shadows (1999) – generally take their narrative perspective from the experiences of
an apprentice, sometimes a boy-actress. These narrators often become the source of lines, plots, characters, and even plays. Widge, for example, finishes off and sells a play that Shakespeare abandons in frustration—with Shakespeare’s permission, however. Claiming part authorship for Timon of Athens may not be as influential as providing whole plot sources for Shakespeare as does Tuck Smythe in Simon Hawke’s mystery series. However, Widge puts his unusual literacy skills to important tasks. After all, the play he must steal in The Shakespeare Stealer is, again, Hamlet.

These young adult novels embrace even more directly than do Shakespearean author novels how living in Shakespeare’s theatre, as Nat Field does in Susan Cooper’s King of Shadows or Perin Willoughby does in A Question of Will, enables narration. In King of Shadows, Nat Field’s miraculous transportation into A Midsummer Night’s Dream in Shakespeare’s company not only saves Shakespeare from catching the plague from the “real” Nat Field but also encourages the twentieth-century Nat to tell his story of parental loss to his new father-figure, Will Shakespeare. Shakespeare, in turn, takes Nat as the model for the Ariel of his Tempest, a character Nat only discovers when he returns to his own time. Thus young adult fiction also embraces the Shakespearean stage, past and present, as context or counterpoint to the important task of narrating adolescent experience.

In addition to recording apprentice narratives, contemporary theatrical situations, and even academic Shakespearean contexts (see Laura Sonnenmark’s Something Rotten in the State of Maryland [1990]), several young adult novels incorporate pre- or alternative histories of characters. Bruce Colville, well known for his picture-book narrations for still younger readers, also offers a slightly older audience The Skull of Truth (1997). This novel recounts the afterlife of a piece of Hamlet, resembling the Shakespearean artifacts in adult novels and the magical “tokens” that appear in other young adult fiction. In Colville’s novel, Yorick’s skull compels its possessor, currently Charlie Eggleston, to tell the absolute truth in answer to all questions. This talent may wreak havoc in Charlie’s friendships and family, but it elicits the truth from developers who unwillingly reveal the problems with their proposed destruction of a local park. The magic compulsion of Yorick’s skull echoes the way Shakespearean artifacts across many popular genres, including the revered documents in the Shakespeare-quest novels, compel or enable narration.

Young adult fiction also translates the Cowden Clarke character narrative into the conventions of current young adult genres. Consider David Bergantino’s young adult horror novel, Hamlet II: Revenge of Ophelia (2003), in which a swamp-like, monstrous Ophelia haunts and destroys
numerous friends of Cameron Dean, Hamlet’s descendant. Cameron has inherited a version of the plot (the death of his father and remarriage of his mother to his paternal aunt Claudia), half of Hamlet’s ghost (the family curse), and Elsinore itself (including Ophelia’s murderous ghost). More closely allied to the Cowden Clarke model, Leslie Fiedler’s revisionist *Dating Hamlet* (2002) takes Ophelia’s perspective, endows her with herbal knowledge of near-poisons from her dead mother, and gives her a different father, the gravedigger, who becomes her co-conspirator. This novel reworks *Hamlet* into a successful *Romeo and Juliet*, with a decisive Ophelia and a Hamlet who really does love her so much that “forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up [his] sum” (5.1.264–66).

Not only does Ophelia see Old Hamlet’s ghost and ally herself with Hamlet from the start, she also feigns madness to torment and escape the villainous Claudius, who has, she thinks, sent her Hamlet to his death. She stages her own death, and, using the same potion, she arranges with her brother to stage his and Hamlet’s deaths and subsequent revivals in the same way. The virtuous (Hamlet and Laertes) and the repentant (Gertrude) receive the antidote after the duel scene, but Fortinbras decides that Claudius does not merit revival. Fiedler’s retelling/rewriting of *Hamlet* through Ophelia’s first-person narrative re-imagines the play through the invested, revisionist perspective of an individual character.

This novel presents in much more blatant terms the gynocentric perspectives that critics have begun to track in Shakespearean contemporary fiction. In its perspectival shift and investment in female agency, *Dating Hamlet* takes up contemporary feminist ideology much as George Gross has argued that Mary Cowden Clarke’s novellas about Ophelia and other Shakespearean female characters engage with Victorian perceptions of women. By reworking the “truth” underlying familiar performances of *Hamlet*, Fiedler positions Ophelia’s decisive narrative as more central than Hamlet’s performances. At the same time, however, Ophelia’s narrative power relies on her greater awareness of the performances going on in Denmark: she participates in Hamlet’s performance of madness, stages her own drowning, and manipulates Claudius’s fraudulent duel so that neither he nor Hamlet realizes that they do not genuinely face death. Her narration thus preserves not only Hamlet’s life but also his “genuine” love and heroism—he declaims his love for her and justifiably kills his murderous uncle at long last without knowing that Ophelia has enabled his actions by her staging.

In similar but less obvious ways, “literary” novelists have consistently recast the narrative point of view in *Hamlet*, echoing the contentions between narrative perspectives we have seen in the play itself. As far back as Lillie Buffum Chace Wyman’s *Gertrude of Denmark: An Interpretive
Romance (1924) and James Cabell’s Hamlet Had an Uncle: A Comedy of Honor (1940), novelists have embraced these alternative narrative perspectives. As Rozett implies in her analysis of Wyman’s personally revelatory novel, these novelists explore how narration’s psychological interiority can outdo and even rewrite Hamlet as staged. In Gertrude and Claudius (2000), John Updike validates narration in multiple ways while embracing Gertrude and Claudius’s perspectives. Updike alternates his limited third-person narrative principally between Gerutha-Geruthe-Gertrude and Feng-Fengo-Claudius. Throughout its three acts, the novel shifts the spellings of its characters’ names in ways that invoke the source narratives preceding Shakespeare’s play:

Part I is based on the oldest Hamlet legend of Historia Danica of Saxo Grammaticus, a late text of the twelfth century, published first in 1514, with its tone of the old saga; Part II is related to the French version of Francois de Belleforest’s Histoires tragiques (Paris, 1576) of the Saxo original with Updike’s embroidered version of medieval romances, while Part III presents the events of Hamlet just before the play begins.10

Despite this slow approach to Hamlet and the telling use of Shakespearean character names in the title (one wonders how well Gerutha and Feng would work as a title), Gertrude and Claudius never actually arrives; Updike positions his novel as a prequel while its shifting nomenclature implies both the priority of Hamlet’s narrative precursors and its universality in reiterable narrative.

However, even within this overdetermined narrative framework, the novel reveals its connections to theatre. The exterior performances of dialogue and behavior help create intimacy in the limited third-person narrations of Gertrude and Claudius. Such intimacy, and its concomitant involvement in staged behavior, pervades the adulterous relationship Geruthe and Fengon pursue:

“I make no claims, Geruthe, I am a beggar shearly. The truth is simple: I live only in your company. The rest is performance.”

“This is not performance?” Geruthe said dryly, brushing his tingling hair with a hand gone cold in the fatality of her commitment. “We must find a better stage – one not borrowed from our king.”11

Although performance and the stage become metaphors in Geruthe and Fengon’s conversation, the figurative theatre pervades the roles that the secret lovers must play in public and, increasingly, with each other. The individual, psychological reality reveals everything else as mere performance, as Claudius’s meditations about Gertrude reveal: “Whenever he
saw her afresh... he realized what was, simply, real, all the rest being an idle show of theatrical seeming.” Unlike the perpetually sulky and self-dramatizing Amleth-Hamblet-Hamlet throughout Gertrude and Claudius, Gertrude possesses “that within which passes show” (Hamlet, 1.2.85), at least for Updike’s Claudius. The irony of Claudius’s final thought, “all would be well,” derives ultimately from the ways in which repeated stage Hamlets both underwrite and undo Updike’s novel.

As Gertrude and Claudius illustrates with its layered yet unitary narrative, the very “pastness” of Shakespeare’s plays exposes the conflicted position of time in narration. Staging Hamlet “revives” the play and the character, as the epigraphs to this essay imply. The play occurs live onstage, and its sequential performance develops in actors and audiences who are actually moving through time. However, the play, with its internal narrations, also invokes the complexities of narrative time which detective fiction best exposes:

> Narratives are read consecutively from beginning to end, and often over a gradual period of time; their plots inevitably concern the sequential nature of events and the influence of the past upon the present; and their narration usually recounts what has already happened in a third- or first-person point of view that implies temporal distance between action and narration... Detective fiction, which begins ex post facto, and in which the detective must reconstruct the past, exacerbates this temporal relationship.

Detective fiction underscores not only the perspectival stakes espoused in narration but also narration’s crucially conflicted involvement with both priority and sequence.

By offering Shakespearean character novels as detective fiction, Alan Gordon underscores the temporal complexities that Shakespearean novels like Gertrude and Claudius expose so delicately. Gordon set his first historical mystery, Thirteenth Night (1999), in the medieval period, significantly predating Shakespeare. Yet the central characters of the novel and of the series, Feste and Viola, appear in Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night; Gordon’s master fool Feste and widowed Viola thus presumably function as the prior and “authentic” narrative that Shakespeare only partially presents. At the same time, as the title suggests, the narrative picks up after the play’s events, which Theophilos, alias Feste, has manipulated because the Guild of Fools dispatched his “admirable fooling” to insure social stability in Illyria. Whereas Fiedler gives Ophelia the governing perspective and Updike recasts Hamlet through the point of view of “Claudius... as able and worthy king and husband [and] Gertrude a loving queen and mother,” Gordon liberates Shakespeare’s fools from their ironic isolation and gives Feste’s/Theophilos’s...
narration as evidence that the guild functions as the true unacknowledged legislator of the world. At the end of *Thirteenth Night*, when Theophilos has married the widowed Viola and initiated her into the guild as well, the series apparently moves beyond its Shakespearean origins into medieval politics and social instabilities.

Gordon returns to Shakespeare in his recent novel, *An Antic Disposition* (2004), which, like *Thirteenth Night*, underscores the problematic temporal relationships imbedded in narration. Since the birth of their daughter Portia, Viola/Claudia and Feste/Theophilos spend their time with the Fools’ Guild listening to stories, including a story told by Gerald, an elder fool, of Denmark’s Feng (Claudius), Ørvendil (old Hamlet), Gerutha (Gertrude), Amleth (Hamlet), and, of course, Yorick, the fool that the guild has sent to the troubled Danish court. In this retrospective telling, Yorick is the crucial figure, fool to the doomed Ørvendil and friend to Amleth, whom he trains in self-protective madness and foolery. The narrative recasts Amleth’s madness and his duel with Lothar/Laertes as the work of apprentice fools who escape their grisly ends with the guild’s help and become fools themselves.

However, Gerald’s story does not include the key details that Theophilis recounts to Claudia afterwards when he admits he was Lothar/Laertes; he completes the story of his youthful relationship to Amleth and his sister Ophelia/Alfhild. After Amleth reveals to Lothar that his real father was Yorick, murdered by the jealous Gorm/Polonius, Lothar, in turn, confesses that he let Gerutha die from the poisoned cup because she drowned Ophelia herself. Thus Gordon takes the potential guilt in Gertrude’s story about Ophelia’s drowning and recasts her entirely as the villain. In fact, not only did she drug Ørvendil’s drink before he went to duel Feng, but she also killed Lothar’s mother with a potion. Her thwarted ambitions and violent jealousy of other women have driven all the events from behind the scenes. This secondary narrative further complicates the underpinnings to the staged behavior in *Hamlet*. Gordon’s nested narratives not only rework the narrative underlying the superficial staged events of *Hamlet*, much as other character novels do, but also draw attention to the medieval origins of the play, as Updike does.

By turning Shakespeare into fiction, popular novelists rework Shakespeare’s own creative process. As many of *Hamlet*’s afternovels recall, Shakespeare reworked novellas, prose romances, and histories as drama. Geoffrey Bullough’s magisterial and still authoritative *Narrative and Dramatic Sources for Shakespeare* lists “narrative” first for a reason. When Gordon’s novel authorizes the narrator of his series, Theophilos, as both Feste and Laertes, he effectively recasts Shakespearean theatre within narration that both precedes and follows the plays while simultaneously locating narration originating in the always-performing fool.
The wide array of detective fiction that actually takes place in the theatre also asserts the advantages that narration supposedly has over staging. Some of these detective novels imply that their narrations provide the events and sometimes actual lines that Shakespeare incorporates into his plays, as in Simon Hawke’s amusing titled mysteries, most recently including *The Merchant of Vengeance* (2003). Others, like Michael Innes’s *Hamlet, Revenge!* (1937) or Marvin Kaye’s *Bullets for Macbeth* (1976), offer narrative co-opting of theatrical effects (Hamlet killing Polonius as the Hamlet actor killing the Polonius actor) or theatrically inspired resolutions for textual problems (the Third Murderer in *Macbeth*). Turning theatre into background neatly affirms the greater importance of narration while the detective genre itself explores the “temporal distance between action and narration.”

Philip Gooden’s *Sleep of Death* (2000), which takes place in the Shakespearean theatre, effectively illustrates how detective fiction engages issues of both perspective and sequential priority. At the same time that Gooden includes multiple retellings of the *Hamlet* murder from several perspectives, sometimes in dialogue, sometimes in narrative, the novel also oscillates between narrative to performance. The very first “narration” records in italics the perspective of the murderer and his actions in the enclosed garden. Italicized accounts from the perspective of the murderer serve as prologues to each of the book’s five “Acts.” The subsequent narrations of the play compete with and complement the murderer’s version. Actor Nick Revill recounts the eventful murder in Shakespeare’s play during his erotic encounter with his prostitute lover Nell. Thus, the “high points” of the murder plot are punctuated with reminders of the simultaneous sexual action. Even while Nick’s perspective seems to dominate the narrative, Nell’s asides remind the reader that action counterpoints narrative. Just as important, the story of *Hamlet* soon proves to be more generally possessed by other perspectives, as Master William Eliot asks Revill to stay at his home in order to investigate the odd coincidences in his own family narrative – his father’s death and his mother Lady Alice’s swift remarriage to his Uncle Thomas. The issue rapidly becomes one of priority since the death occurred before Shakespeare’s play was performed.

Like most detectives, Revill soon finds that there are competing narratives that could explain the death of Sir William Eliot – perhaps the lady committed or commissioned the murder or possibly the father-uncle killed the brother whom he was cuckolding regularly. However, the signature of William Shakespeare is also all over the death – he is the man who wrote the play resembling Eliot’s death and representing that death as murder, and the initials W. S. appear carved in the pear tree where Revill deduces that the
murderer hid. As S. E. Sweeney notes, the detective seeks the authoritative narrative among several possible narratives, the revelation of the murderer, and his perspective and motives. In the structure of Gooden’s novel, this quest emerges also in the contest between the italicized narratives from the murderer’s point of view and the ongoing exploration of our detective-actor, whose judgments rest in part on his understanding of how people on and off stage play roles and stage their own public displays.

As Shakespeare’s Hamlet shifts uneasily between narrative and staging to establish truth, so, too, does Shakespearean detective fiction. To resolve these multiple possible narratives and, most important, to test whether Shakespeare is guilty of committing the murder in actuality rather than just in drama, Revill uses the play to catch the conscience of the murderer, rewriting some of the lines in the play within the play where he acts the role of Lucianus. He discovers the murderer in front of him, the actor playing the Player-King, rather than the author. Thus Hamlet both provokes the multiple narratives Revill contemplates and becomes the theatrical occasion that reveals the actual killer, a company member who knew the play while it was being written. Gooden’s Sleep of Death negotiates the relationship between narration and staging of Shakespeare in ways that identify both perspective and temporal priority as crucial.

Shakespearean detective fiction’s interrogation of narrative time reaches a bizarre pinnacle of literary self-examination in Jasper Fforde’s Something Rotten (2004), his fourth novel about Thursday Next. Fresh from her adventures living in literary texts and running Jurisfiction, Fforde’s heroine returns to the supposedly real world with Hamlet as one of her companions. On leave from his play out of his concern for his “real-world” reputation, Hamlet stumbles upon several displacements of himself: the numerous familiar film and stage productions that represent him; a “Hamlet WillSpeak machine,” which recites “to be or not to be” for two shillings; and an impromptu Hamlet contest, in which his rendition of the same soliloquy comes in last. The trauma of Hamlet’s encounters with his representations sends him to a conflict-management specialist and result in a (temporarily) decisive and active Hamlet. Partaking in Thursday’s adventures, Hamlet finally realizes that his public reputation as “a mouthy spoiled brat who can’t make up his mind” is less important than his new understanding that “my play is popular because my failings are your failings, my indecision is the indecision of you all.” A combination of time-travel and extra-literary experiences puts Hamlet in touch with his own inner universality.

Something Rotten’s other Hamlet crises appear more serious since they include both character insurrection and the troublesome “conjointment” of
Hamlet and Merry Wives into The Merry Wives of Elsinore. The insurrections parody character novels as the Polonius family petitions for “Internal Plot Adjustment requests” (p. 114) to rewrite the play from their own perspectives – starting with “The Tragedy of the Fair Ophelia Driven Mad by the Callous Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.” These “minor” difficulties in Jurisfiction lead to the less tractable problem of the book merger, “where one book joined with another to increase its collective narrative advantage.”

To ensure that Hamlet will continue to exist, Thursday must find one of the Shakespeares secretly cloned by the novel’s corporate villain and commission a new “original” manuscript. With Hamlet and Hamlet under pressure on several plot levels, Fforde playfully exposes the problems of Shakespearean priority – both priorness and authority – in a vertiginous literary time travel paradox. Moreover, Hamlet’s various interactions with performances of himself turn out to be crucial in restoring him to his literary self, once Thursday has freed the play from its entanglements with Merry Wives.

Fforde’s self-conscious narration of Hamlet’s encounters with theatre and performance offers a thoroughly postmodern metaphysics of literary reality. Despite its persistent relationships with both detective and science fiction, Something Rotten escapes genre fiction and typically appears on literature and fiction shelves. In Fforde’s novels literary criticism becomes detective work and “Jurisfiction” while both drama and fiction are indiscriminately enfolded into “BookWorld.” The Shakespeare in Fforde’s literary universe bridges the several modes of Shakespearean fiction I have been exploring: narratives of authorial (re)construction, with the author literally cloned; the character novel, with Hamlet’s “extra-literary” adventures; and the ultimate combination of theatrical and quasi-academic contextual novels.

Despite Fforde’s fantasy of the vulnerability of Shakespearean forms, both Shakespeare’s plays and his life have become important formulas in genre fiction. In responses to those fixed forms, Shakespearean popular fiction actively wrestles with what it can offer as the “special character” of its own. Most often the answer is narrative perspective, valued throughout popular culture and courted in the niche marketing of current genre fiction. Given that “popular fiction” now covers an array of increasingly specific genres that appeal to audiences identified by age (young adult), gender (chick lit. and lad lit.), and status (“Book Review” novels versus science fiction, romance, and detective fiction, to name the big three), both narrative perspective and established forms have become ever more important. Shakespearean novels, of course, have always courted and perhaps created niche audiences, as when Mary Cowden Clarke’s Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines embraced fictional perspectives aimed largely to appeal to women.
readers. The very recent novels which I have been exploring here bear out Shakespeare’s place in fiction-making and tailored audience appeal. The plays themselves, like *Hamlet*, often use multiple narratives and perspectives that in turn provoke later fictional development of those perspectives and plot sequencing. As a result, the stressful interplay between narrative and drama that pervades Shakespeare’s plays continues to inform their novelistic afterlives and participates in larger current cultural struggles between narrative/reading and media/performance.

In the author novels, perspective challenges staging because narrative point of view reveals the author even while Shakespeare’s highly publicized persona depends upon theatrical performance. The shift from *Tales* to young adult fiction exposes our investment in the adolescent perspective, in youthful time-travelers, apprentices, or Shakespearean characters who contend with an adult world that always seems staged. While Shakespearean contextual novels embrace the theatre in order to subordinate it, often incompletely, to the behind-the-scenes power of the back story, character novels expose most clearly how celebratory validation of narrative provokes conundrums comparable to Hamlet’s. Which comes first, the ghost’s narrative or the play that already staged his death, narration or performance? Is access to personal perspective crucial enough to outweigh biased narrative? Twenty-first century Shakespearean popular fiction embraces these conflicts surrounding perspective, while also exploring the temporal paradoxes of Shakespeare’s priority: the pre-existence of his plays enables the subsequent explanatory adaptations which in turn present themselves as precursors. Throughout its various narrative modes and generic forms, Shakespearean popular fiction re-enacts an ongoing, cyclical struggle between narrating events and enacting them, a struggle over perspective, priority, and power.

NOTES


