

AEDEAN 2016

Round Table

Shakespeare's Afterlives

Clara Calvo, Ángeles de la Concha, Celestino Deleyto, and Douglas Lanier

The current worldwide appeal of Shakespeare in both high and popular culture suggests that his works have not lost their aura in the era of mechanical and digital reproduction. At the turn of the twentieth century, the arrival of motion pictures made some think that the end of art, literature and high culture was near. Cartoons and satirical magazines fantasied with a modern, contemporary Shakespeare who would be forced to write film scripts instead of plays. At the turn of the twentieth-first century, the new modes of artistic expression encouraged and disseminated by TV the Internet and other digital platforms have launched apocalyptic announcements of the imminent death of the novel and cinema as art forms. Rather than succumbing to competition from TV series, blogs, video-blogs, memes and fandom, the old art forms of poetry, fiction and cinema are still going strong and contributing to the afterlives of Shakespeare.

In this Round Table, we invite you to explore with us and enjoy the diversity of artistic contributions to the enduring presence of Shakespeare as cultural catalyst. The plays of Shakespeare have, since the eighteenth-century at least, continued to inspire artists worldwide. Writers, filmmakers, musicians, painters and photographers have adapted or appropriated plots, characters, metaphors, themes and topics to produce new artworks. By doing so, they have made the plays relevant for our time. In this, they have been joined by advertisers, video-bloggers, museum curators and TV scriptwriters who are actively expanding the creative input of Shakespeare's plays and poems. If Shakespeare is for all ages and for all times, if his works retain their global and universal appeal, it is in great measure because creativity worldwide has been fuelled by his plays and poems and new artworks have interpreted them for us through a variety of artistic practices.

Ángeles de la Concha will explore the way contemporary fiction takes up Shakespeare's world and resituates some of its plights in our own troubling times. Following the brilliant experiments carried out by Jane Smiley's

transposing of *King Lear* into the American Midwest in the late 1970s in her Pulitzer-winning novel *A Thousand Acres* or Marina Warner's postmodern postcolonial reworking of *The Tempest* in *Indigo* in 1992, to name but a couple of examples, the Hogarth Press recently launched the project of a full series of retellings of Shakespeare's plays asking some of the bestselling and most recognized contemporary novelists to choose a play and reimagine it in a contemporary context.

Taking on a retelling of a classic, particularly in the case of Shakespeare, has the danger of inviting comparisons with the original. Yet, rather than doing so, we as readers are invited to engage in dialogue with the originals and examine in what way key issues, characters and situations explored in Shakespeare's plays may find their parallel in our own time. No less interesting is to speculate whether contemporary cultural and discursive changes accountable for shifts in the resulting artistic recreations may shed new light on aspects of the plays chosen, opening them to further interpretations. In this context, she will invite discussion on the novels of the first phase of the Hogarth project: Jeanette Winterson's *The Gap of Time*, Howard Jacobson's *Shylock Is My Name*, Anne Tyler's *Vinegar Girl*, and Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed* — rewritings and reinventions of, respectively, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Tempest*.

Celestino Deleyto will consider both the importance of Shakespeare for the history of cinema and of cinema for the history of Shakespeare. Film adaptations in general, particularly of canonical works, have consistently enjoyed bad press among film critics and scholars, yet the wealth and variety of adaptations, versions and reworkings of Shakespeare for the big screen have turned the bard into something of an exception and, it might be argued, a kind of cinematic genre in itself. Conversely, filmic Shakespeare did not fare well, to say the least, among traditional Shakespearean scholars, who derided and resented what for them was always inevitably a bowdlerization of the immortal poet. Yet the constant morphing and transformation of his plays and their contexts, particularly after the 1960s, gradually brought Shakespeare the filmmaker closer to the centre of the Shakespearean debate. The amount of movies based on Shakespeare's works is breathtaking: IMDb lists over one thousand, including all sorts of audiovisual genres, and most lists feature over 450 and counting.

More than a century of visibility of Shakespeare on the big and small screens have inevitably created an impressive cinematic Shakespearean canon which would include, at least, William Dieterle and Max Reinhardt's classical Hollywood *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Olivier's *Henry V*,

Hamlet and *Richard III*, Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* and *Ran*, Welles's *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Chimes at Midnight*, Ingmar Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night*, Kozintsev's *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, Joseph Mankiewicz and Marlon Brando's *Julius Caesar*, Zefirelli's *Taming of the Shrew* and *Romeo and Juliet*, Polanski's *Macbeth*, and Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Hamlet*, to name the most obvious. But this does not even begin to give an idea of the presence of Shakespeare on celluloid (or digital) narratives. Probably the most interesting instances are those that forget faithfulness and even sometimes forget to mention that they are inspired by Shakespeare. I'm not referring to self-conscious adaptations like the popular adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* by Baz Luhrman and Leonardo di Caprio in the 1990s, or the less popular of *Titus Andronicus* by Julie Taymor or *Coriolanus* by Ralph Fiennes, but, rather, to classical musicals like *Kiss Me, Kate* or *West Side Story*, comedies like *Renaissance Man*, teen movies like *Ten Things I Hate about You*, *O* and *She's All That*, or even zombie movies like the excellent recent *Warm Bodies*. Not to mention Al Pacino, Woody Allen or Gus Van Sant.

If it may be said that Shakespeare's presence on the screen has shrunk since the last decades of the 20th century recent movies like Joss Whedon's Santa Monica-based indie version of *Much Ado about Nothing* (2012), the *Romeo and Juliet*'s "zombification" in *Warm Bodies* (2013), or last year's successful new version of *Macbeth* (2015) prove that Shakespeare is alive and well on the proliferating screen formats of the 21st Century. But why is this? Are Shakespeare's plays particularly cinematic? Do we continue to speculate that he would have been a filmmaker rather than a playwright if he had lived in this day and age? Or is it because the mere presence of the bard gives movies much sought-after cultural prestige? Or is it that the stories are so good, the themes so universal? And what is the best cinematic Shakespeare: the faithful, celebratory adaptation, the free version, or the unexpected presence? Why and how is Shakespeare still relevant nowadays?

Douglas Lanier will consider two contemporary arenas in which Shakespeare's afterlife has recently expanded. The first is the web series, serials based upon literary classics made for youtube or other internet-only outlets. These series have their origins in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, a vlog series based upon Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* produced in 2013. Since that time producers of literary web series have embraced Shakespeare as a source of material, creating at last count at least 35 active series with more on the way. Professor Lanier will argue that these series mark a significant advance in Shakespeare on the internet, an attempt to move beyond the one-off parody, school project or single Shakespearean

speech that have heretofore dominated internet Shakespeare. The Shakespeare web series seeks to retell full Shakespearean narratives in new media formats, particularly that of the vlog. Professor Lanier will explore how the vlog format draws Shakespeare into the formal logic and social ideologies of contemporary social media, with interesting results.

The second contemporary arena Professor Lanier will explore is the rise of fictional Shakespearean biography in pop media like comic books, film and television: the comic book series *Kill Shakespeare* (2011-3), the film *Bill* (Richard Bracewell, 2015), the television series *Upstart Crow* (written by Ben Elton, 2016), *Will* (Shekhar Kapur, 2017) and a number of historical romances about Shakespeare and his love life. These fictional treatments of Shakespeare's biography are of a piece with *Shakespeare in Love* (1999), in many ways the forerunner of this trend. As has been typical of fictional treatments of Shakespeare's life, these new works reground Shakespeare's plays in the imagined details of his life. However, these new fictional biographies adopt an ironic tone toward Shakespeare the man, casting him as a nerd, wannabe, or loser who only stumbles into literary success. Professor Lanier will argue that this trend in biographical fictionalization is symptomatic of a fundamental reconception of Shakespeare's authorship and therefore cultural authority, one better in accord with current trends in the adaptation of Shakespeare's works in popular culture.

Clara Calvo will chair the session, introduce the speakers and round up the presentations by looking into minority art forms such as poems and mass-media products such as TV series and BBC documentaries which appropriate, adapt and engage with Shakespeare in diverse ways. From Seamus Heaney and women poets to the *Hollow Crown* (2012) and the documentary films that feature celebrities historians such as Michael Wood or Simon Schama, Shakespeare the man, the playwright and the poet, together with his visions of England and English history, have permeated modern culture since the First World War and continue to do so. By contrasting poetry and TV Shakespeares it is possible to ask questions such as why is Shakespeare's view of England's early modern past so ingrained in cultural memory? What makes it so successful? Is Global Shakespeare contributing to disseminating a particular view of English national identity worldwide – at the expense of erasing other possible views of its historical heritage and colonial past?

After the presentations, there will be some time for questions, comments and debate with the audience.