TALES FROM SHAKESPEARE

In this engaging new book, writer and critic Graham Holderness shows how a classic Shakespeare play can be the source for a modern story, providing a creative 'collision' between the Shakespeare text and contemporary concerns. Using an analogy from particle physics, Holderness tests his methodology through specific examples, structured in four parts: a recreation of performances of *Hamlet* and *Richard II* aboard the East India Company ship the *Red Dragon* in 1607; an imagined encounter between Shakespeare and Ben Jonson writing the King James Bible; the creation of a contemporary folk hero based on *Coriolanus* and drawing on films such as *Skyfall* and *The Hurt Locker*; and an account of the terrorist bombing at a performance of *Twelfth Night* in Qatar in 2005. These pieces of narrative and drama are interspersed with literary criticism, each using a feature of the original Shakespeare play or its performance to illuminate the extraordinary elasticity of Shakespeare. The 'tales' provoke questions about what we understand to be Shakespeare and not-Shakespeare, making the book of vital interest to students, scholars, and enthusiasts of Shakespeare, literary criticism, and creative writing.

GRAHAM HOLDERNESS is Research Professor in English at the University of Hertfordshire. He has published extensively in early modern and modern literature, and drama. His influential publications include *Shakespeare's History* (1985), *The Shakespeare Myth* (1988), the trilogy *Cultural Shakespeare: Essays in the Shakespeare Myth* (2001), *Visual Shakespeare: Essays in Film and Television* (2002), and *Textual Shakespeare: Writing and the Word* (2003), the innovative biography *Nine Lives of William Shakespeare* (2011), and the novel *The Prince of Denmark* (2001). He is also a dramatist and poet, and his poetry collection *Craeft* received a Poetry Book Society award in 2002.

TALES FROM SHAKESPEARE

Creative Collisions

GRAHAM HOLDERNESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107071292

First published 2014

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data
Holderness, Graham.
Tales from Shakespeare : Creative Collisions / Graham Holderness.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-107-07129-2 (hardback)
1. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616–Adaptations–History and criticism. 2. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616–Criticism and interpretation. 3. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616–Influence. I. Title.
PR2880.AIH65 2014
822.3´3–dc23
2014002312

ISBN 978-1-107-07129-2 Hardback

To my parents
Who bought me Tales from Shakespeare

Contents

Preface

1 CREATIVE COLLISIONS

Ideas rose in clouds: I felt them collide until pairs interlocked, so to speak, making a stable combination. (*Henri Poincaré*)

When I first read Shakespeare at school, the plays were firmly located within a set of contingent discourses clearly marking out what was Shakespeare from what was not.

These contexts formed the infrastructure of Shakespeare studies: Tudor history; the arts and manners of the Elizabethan court; the history of the theatre, mediaeval to early modern; the literary world, with its as yet un-dissociated Renaissance sensibility. The critical context was provided by T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, G. Wilson Knight.

Though deeply embedded in this culture, I was also aware that Shakespeare had an unnerving tendency to pop up everywhere around me. I heard his words in pop songs ('You know someone said, the world's a stage'); saw his plays travestied in comedy sketches by Tony Hancock, and Morecombe and Wise ('What d'ye think of it so far?'); found his image in advertisements, and his face on beer-mats. But there seemed to be no bridges linking the Shakespeare of the academy with the Shakespeare of that popular culture my critical mentors despised and ignored; no meaningful connection between Shakespeare and not-Shakespeare.

Thirty years later, it was possible to document these interactions, and to discuss Shakespeare in relation to popular culture, tourism, and advertising; to the general fields of theatre, education, and television; and to social contexts such as politics, media, and gender that had been made visible by critical theory. My edited collection

The Shakespeare Myth (1988) pioneered, in the teeth of no little resistance, many such approaches that have, in the meantime, become much more familiar. But the wounds of controversy quickly heal, and academic institutions adjust and rebalance themselves. Though the geography has changed, there are still clear-cut borders between what is acknowledged to be Shakespeare, and what is not. Or rather, it is accepted that Shakespeare permeates everything, but there is no corresponding recognition that everything permeates Shakespeare.

This book readdresses this problem via a methodology derived from an analogy with contemporary particle physics. The concept of 'collision', signifying the impact of a number of forces and objects upon one another, is a useful analogy for describing and accounting for what sometimes happens to produce the phenomenon we know as 'Shakespeare'. A collision may be violent and destructive, as in a car crash, or it may be harmless and hardly noticeable, as when two people bump into one another. But in every case the collision makes a difference, alters the trajectory of the objects themselves, and creates new energy that did not exist before. The examples of Shakespearean 'collision' I have written on below vary, from the extreme violence of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, to the more 'normal' interaction between a classical text and a contemporary process of adaptation or appropriation. But in every case the collision can be seen to release new 'available energy' and to modify both objects and the forces that move them.

My introduction explores various methodologies based on analogies from the natural sciences, which are widely (if unconsciously) deployed in Shakespeare studies, using *Hamlet* as a test-case. All these approaches concur in proving the extraordinary elasticity of the Shakespearean text, which can undergo protean changes without ever completely losing its identity. Once this position is accepted, it becomes easier to perceive that some encounters between Shakespeare and not-Shakespeare are not at all the random and accidental collisions they at first sight appear to be. Such encounters release new energies and create new particles, generating new meanings and modifying both parties to the collision.

Four chapters of the book test this methodology through specific examples: the performances of *Hamlet* and *Richard II* aboard the East India Company ship the *Red Dragon* off the coast of Africa in 1607; the brief encounter between Shakespeare and the King James Bible

in the latter's anniversary year of 2011; the cinematic adaptation of *Coriolanus* by Ralph Fiennes, which links Shakespeare's play with a modern folk-hero who can also be found in films such as *Skyfall* and *The Hurt Locker*; and lastly the terrorist suicide-bombing of a performance of *Twelfth Night* in Qatar in March 2005, which in turn illuminates the impact on Shakespeare of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In each case, the 'collision' is fully documented and described, contextualised and interpreted, then explained and expounded in terms of the reciprocal impact between 'Shakespeare' and what was 'not-Shakespeare' until the collision itself brought them productively together.

II TALES FROM SHAKESPEARE

'That little poem you wrote in Mrs Matuschek's guest-book; did you make that up yourself?'

'Well, that was half and half.'

'Half and half? What do you mean?'

'Half Shakespeare and half me. You see I just turn the lines around to suit the occasion.' (*The Shop Around the Corner* (1948))

A major thrust of my argument is that the basic primary activities constituting Shakespeare studies – scholarly editing; historical contextualisation and analysis; critical and theoretical interpretation; theatrical or cinematic production; creative adaptation – exist in a continuum, and when compared, prove to be remarkably similar to one another. My view, which I developed previously in the book *Textual Shakespeare* (2003), is that all these activities resemble one another more than they differ. They are all, in fact, 'appropriations', and there is no other way of approaching Shakespeare but by appropriation of one kind or another. As I wrote:

> The ultimate question ... concerns the relations between these various activities that go on with, and around, literary texts – reading, textual scholarship, editorial processing, critical interpretation, textual theory. Are these quite different activities that need to be understood in terms of their interaction with one another, or are they are all aspects of a common search for understanding through writing? Do they represent different ways of

interpreting the process of reading; or are they all rather extensions of the single fundamental act of reading – reading, as it were, at a more advanced level? If the latter, then we move from a model in which reading is the primary activity, and all other critical and scholarly functions become secondary, ancillary to the originating act of decoding; to one in which the processes of remaking the text are shared in common between textual study, editing, critical interpretation, indeed all our various 'reading' practices; where 'a real reader is a writer'.[1]

All readings of Shakespeare are appropriations. So are all scholarly texts, and critical discussions, and theatrical productions, and creative adaptations of Shakespeare, appropriations. The 'collisions' I have studied here will bear out these assertions. But the final test for such a view rests with the creative rewriting or reworking of Shakespeare: is it still 'Shakespeare'? Or something else? The position I argue is that expressed by Hélène Cixous in the maxim quoted above: 'The real reader is a writer.' In *Textual Shakespeare* I took this exhortation literally, and made the quantum leap from 'reading' to 'writing' as a proper critical activity. If our processes of reading involve a continual remaking of Shakespeare, then our writing should also entail rewriting. Criticism must involve the creative deployment of literary conventions, as well as the discursive prosecution of rational argument. *Textual Shakespeare* included, between its chapters of academic analysis, short creative pieces – poems and translations, rewritten Shakespeare scenes, extracts from a novel – that comment on, and pursue, the intellectual arguments by creative reworkings of language.

In a more recent work, *Nine Lives of William Shakespeare* (2011), I took this approach much further, balancing scholarly and critical argument around the Shakespeare biography with specimens of creative writing that parallel the academic discussion.

This book therefore ruptures some of the boundaries that normally corral academic and scholarly discourses separately from creative and imaginative writing. What this means is that the book operates on two discrete 'tracks', running in parallel and intersecting, but operating by different sets of rules or signals. In the creative works, the historical facts and traditions are implicit, but the normal disciplines of scholarly writing do not apply. Here some of the facts are invented; traditions are offered as facts; speculation is presented as manifest knowledge.[2]

'Criticism' and 'creativity' are generally thought of, both in theory and practice, as alternatives. Their pairing even sets them up in binary opposition, one against the other. And when we look at the ways in which we construct critical writing, in the curriculum and in everyday pedagogic practice, this is understandable. It is almost de rigueur to open a discussion of these issues with parallel columns of descriptive terms that we apply respectively to critical and creative writing. On the one hand, criticism is discursive, analytical, logical, clear, argumentative, impersonal, objective. On the other hand, creativity is intuitive, evocative, expressive, performative, personal, subjective. And so on.

And yet criticism, or at least literary criticism, is surely nothing more than an effort to explain and account for creativity, as it is manifested in writing. There is, at the very least, continuity between the two, since the one is a means to knowledge of the other. Typically the critical incorporates the creative into itself, by the device of quotation. At the very best, one might claim that criticism is the precursor of creativity, criticism's John the Baptist to creativity's Christ, announcing its imminent advent. Like John the Baptist, criticism is 'not itself that light', but is 'sent to bear witness of that light'. The best criticism ushers creativity into human knowledge, so that the light need not shine in darkness; but then eclipses itself in favour of a greater one who is to come. As creativity waxes, so criticism wanes. Having prophesied creativity's imminence and its own demise, criticism faces a kenotic evacuation of meaning as it renders the creative intelligible and accessible in its own right.

However, in reality, things are not that simple. Notwithstanding his deference and deferral to Jesus, John claimed considerable authority in his own right too, not least the authority of tradition, of the Old Testament prophets; and many people (including Herod Antipas) could not tell the difference between Jesus and John. A few Christians still follow John, believing him to be the true Messiah. And some have argued for a systematic replacement of literature by literary theory.

I want to suggest a different relationship between criticism and creativity: to suggest that the best criticism is actually creative writing, and that the two are not really binary opposites at all, but more like non-identical twins (as Jesus and John are often represented). Criticism that separates itself off from literature, linguistically and discursively, is producing something else, philosophy or critical theory. The most

perfect harmony between criticism and creativity is where they become almost indistinguishable. And possibly the best criticism of all is that which succeeds in using language in the way it is used by creative writers.

'Creative criticism' mingles criticism and creativity together in a promiscuously hybrid discourse. Its arguments operate, as do the creative works it studies, as much by metaphor as by logical argument. And it penetrates into areas where criticism normally dares not go, deep into the subjectivity of the critic and reader. It proposes, in short, a new and fundamentally reorientated relationship between criticism and creativity.

The function of such rewriting in *Tales from Shakespeare* was to formally convert Shakespeare into not-Shakespeare, in order to determine how much of 'Shakespeare' remains. The fictional excursions that follow arise in each case from the particular collision under investigation: they represent examples of new particles and new energies released by the impact. Chapter 2 invents a shipboard journal that provides an imaginary eyewitness account of *Richard II* being performed off the coast of Sierra Leone. Chapter 4 supplements the convergence of Shakespeare and the King James Bible with a dramatic extension of two short stories, by Rudyard Kipling and Anthony Burgess, which imagine Shakespeare becoming involved in the production of the Authorized Version. Chapter 6 pursues the case that Ralph Fiennes's adaptation of *Coriolanus* produces a generic twentieth-century folk-hero, by locating Shakespeare's Roman character inside a spy thriller. Chapter 8 provides a critical-creative commentary on Shakespeare and terrorism, by weaving together an analysis of an event, the bombing of the Doha Players Theatre in 2005, with an imagined narrative of the suicide bomber's own encounter with Shakespeare.

Many things collide in the pages below: ships and plays, Southwark and Africa; theatre and pulpit, the Globe and St Paul's; Rome and Belgrade, Coriolanus and James Bond; Al-Quaeda and amateur dramatics, car bombs and poetry. It is a book about many different things.

But it remains, in the end, a book about Shakespeare.

Acknowledgements

Parts of the Introduction were previously published in '"Dressing old words new": Shakespeare, Science and Appropriation', *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, 1:2 (University of Georgia, October 2005), n.p. Earlier versions of the two chapters of Part IV appeared as 'Shakespeare and Terror', *Shakespeare After 9/11*, special issue of *Shakespeare Yearbook*, edited by Matthew Biberman, Julia Reinhard Lupton, and Graham Holderness (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011), and '"Rudely interrupted": Shakespeare and Terrorism' (with Bryan Loughrey) *Critical Survey*, 19:3 (December 2007). Material is reproduced by kind permission of the editors.

The play *Wholly Writ* was performed at Shakespeare's Globe in June 2011 and at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon, in July 2011. The Globe cast comprised: James Wallace as William Shakespeare, Kevin Quarmby as Ben Jonson, Frances Marshall as Ann Shakespeare, and Rachel Winters as Judith Shakespeare. The Stratford cast comprised: Sam Lesser as William Shakespeare, John Heffernan as Ben Jonson, and Penny Downie as Ann and Judith Shakespeare.