



BOOK REVIEW:  
*Shakespeare and Science Fiction*

*Noah Slowik*

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It can be easy not to notice the scope of a canonical author's influence on science fiction until someone points it out. The writer who has left, perhaps, the most resounding impact on SF – more than Homer, Ovid, Chaucer, or any one of the Romantic poets or Victorian novelists – is William Shakespeare. In *Shakespeare and Science Fiction*, Sarah Annes Brown offers a comprehensive analysis of Shakespeare's presence in SF to date. The greatest strength of Brown's investigation lies in its evidential data, focusing on explicit references to Shakespeare in SF. Without attempting to locate him as the origin of SF, Brown offers an overview of Shakespearean allusions as proof of Shakespeare's ability to be paradoxically both more and less than other authors. While providing the groundwork for evidence of Shakespeare's ubiquity in SF, she also leaves room for interpretation by other scholars on the importance of his lasting influence. Through a survey of the subgenres of stories revolving around time travel, alternate history, dystopia, aliens, space exploration, posthumanism, and the post-apocalypse, Brown shows how SF reveals readings of Shakespeare that would be otherwise unreachable within the confines of realist fiction.

According to Brown, the subgenre of time travel especially allows SF writers to incorporate Shakespeare as a character. For example, Brown contrasts Isaac Asimov's inclusion of Shakespeare in "The Immortal Bard" (1954) with that by Hugh Kingsmill in *The Return of William Shakespeare* (1929). While each deploy a similar novum of transporting bewildered Shakespeares from the past to the present, Brown concludes Kingsmill's time-travelling bard is superior to Asimov's because of the disorientation he undergoes when thrust into modernity. In addition to this, Brown refers to playful examples such as the Shakespeare of Frank Ramirez's "The Merchant of

Stratford” (1979) who has been visited by time travelers so many times that he becomes a fan and writes an SF novel himself. There is, too, the case of Shakespeare’s disappointment at a production of Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in Harry Turtledove’s “We Haven’t Got There Yet” (2009). Altogether, these humorous anecdotes exemplify how time travel SF is the subgenre that most brings out the modern comedy of Shakespeare.

Shakespeare may also appear as a character in alternate history, which, Brown notes, is the SF subgenre that is the most pertinent to the realm of geopolitics. For example, she compares Keith Roberts’s *Pavane* (1968) with Kingsley Amis’s *The Alteration* (1976). The former is a story about an assassination of Elizabeth I that disrupts Shakespeare’s composition of *Richard III*. The latter features Martin Luther remaining a Catholic, which in turn leads to the diminishment of Shakespeare’s reputation and his transportation to what has become the country of New England in the northeast of the US. Each of these novels considers what a world would feel like in the absence of an ever-looming Shakespeare, arguably the greatest writer in the history of the English language. Similarly, in Robert Silverberg’s *The Gate of Worlds* (1967), Shakespeare is forced to write plays about Turkish sultans, rather than English monarchs, as Europe has succumbed to the power of the Ottoman Empire. As Brown discusses, these alternate histories force us to consider how the Bard’s work would hold up outside a geopolitically English context.

While Brown makes the connection between alternate history and geopolitics, she sees instances of Shakespeare in dystopian literature as inextricably tied to politics in general. Brown finds a famous example of this political edge, for example, in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), one of the novels whose title comes directly from a line in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. In addition to synthesizing a debate over a comparison between Mustapha Mond and Prospero, Brown notes how Huxley embodies Shakespeare’s knack for exploring philosophical questions about the world, such as what happens to society when it no longer appreciates great art. Furthermore, in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Shakespeare and other canonical writers are translated into Newspeak and thus mediated by authoritarian subliminal messages. Even when Shakespeare lives on through oral tradition in Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), it is possible to misquote the classics over time if only recited from memory by those accustomed to the memory aids of a modern world. As a result, this discussion leads Brown to conclude that lack of appreciation for the value of Shakespeare often leads to corruption in dystopian novels.

Stories of space travel and alien encounters further function as a litmus test for Shakespeare’s universal appeal. Although it is possible to divide the two into separate subgenres, it makes sense that Brown groups them together because Shakespeare serves similar purposes in these subgenres. In various instances throughout Kim Stanley Robinson’s Mars trilogy (1992-96), for example, Shakespeare acts as a sort of cultural artefact to cling to as a remnant of Terran civilization during interplanetary colonization. Just as the impact of a play can be altered depending on the historical context and delivery, Brown explains how Robinson’s speculations about Shakespeare on a newly terraformed planet develop fresh interpretations. A similar appreciation is demonstrated in Anne McCaffrey’s *The Ship Who Sang* (1969) where the Bard’s works are so highly lauded that they are translated into an alien language. Some

years ago, in a podcast interview with Brown, Barbara Bogaev asked whether there is a more terrifying and harrowing situation for an actor than representing humanity to an alien civilization through their ability to perform Shakespeare. Bogaev's question gets at the heart of how – when faced with the task of hypothetically conveying ourselves to aliens – Shakespeare is a touchstone for human nature. In any event, these intersections with extraterrestrial life are perhaps the ultimate demonstration of Shakespeare being both everything and nothing, a recurring thread throughout Brown's book.

As an outlier section of the book, Brown dedicates a chapter to the way SF writers have been continuously inspired by one play in particular, *The Tempest*. For example, Neil Gaiman's last volume in his Sandman series, *The Wake* (1996), considers what *The Tempest* might look like if Shakespeare was decoupled from Prospero. Within the framework of a single play, Brown sees Gaiman question Shakespeare's authority in a way similar to that in stories of time travel, space exploration, and alien encounter. Another text that draws heavily upon *The Tempest* is Clifford Simak's *Shakespeare's Planet* (1976), which follows the same trajectory as the drama. Simak's novel includes a playful twist where there is a character named Shakespeare, but he is not the Elizabethan playwright. Rather, the character has chosen that name from a copy of the playwright's Complete Works. Although *The Tempest* has directly inspired SF works more than Shakespeare's other plays, in Brown's view the best adaptations are texts that remain true to the original play's magical essence while also bringing something innovative to the table, no matter the play chosen from Shakespeare's oeuvre.

With Caliban's betweenness in mind, posthuman identity is another SF subgenre that has taken up Shakespeare in a philosophically complex way. It is no surprise that *Hamlet*, too, is of particular interest to SF writers who explore what it means to be posthuman. The play involves toiling over coming to terms with oneself, an increasingly common question as today's AI technology progresses. One of the most popular examples where Brown sees this apparent connection is Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy's *Westworld* (2016). The fascinating contradiction in this show, however, is that the androids end up seeming more human than the humans themselves. Brown concludes that the similarities between Hamlet and machine learning intensify rather than lessen the Dane's humanity, reiterating the point that human and technology are perhaps more alike than they initially seem. Exploring this point, Brown also detects traces of Shakespeare in robot literature as early as Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* (1920). Exaggerated as it may sound, perhaps humanity faces a fate similar to the one depicted in this play, a robot revolution, if the complexities of posthuman identity are left ignored. Especially on the topic of the posthuman, Brown acknowledges that the influence of Shakespeare leaves many unanswered questions.

Brown concludes her book with a final chapter about the depiction of an omnipresent Shakespeare in literature that deals with situations pertaining to the end times, post-apocalyptic fiction. Of course, religion was a prominent topic for Shakespeare, who lived in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, and Brown notes how the book of Revelation resonates in both *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. There is, for example, an invocation of a *Macbeth* performance in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), and the play's horror aptly contributes to the novel's bleak ambiance. Additionally, as Emily St. John Mandel's *Station*

*Eleven* (2014) features a performance of *King Lear*, Brown points out that “Both Shelley and Mandel transform Shakespeare into a presage of apocalypse” (176). Since his works are deeply concerned with God, it is no surprise that SF including Shakespeare would pose theological questions as well. As Brown puts it on the final page of her book, there is a sense that Shakespeare has replaced God in SF.

Overall, *Shakespeare and Science Fiction* provides a foundation for looking into Shakespeare’s everlasting resonance within the genre, and it is exciting to think about how creators of SF may continue to engage with his works in innovative ways in the future. Thankfully, knowledge of the canons of both SF and Shakespeare in their entirety is not prerequisite to recognizing the implications of Brown’s analysis. She writes accessibly enough by digging directly into the major works and glossing over the lesser-known ones. Though Brown’s study may be too in-depth to be assigned as course material to undergraduate students, it could be useful for SF writers to discover unused aspects of Shakespeare’s corpus as inspiration for their work. Since this book is the first of its kind, Brown has started the conversation. However, there is more to be said about the instances she has unveiled, and there are likely more examples of Shakespeare in SF than what Brown covered. Nevertheless, this book is an invaluable resource for scholars looking to think through the ways in which Shakespeare has inspired SF writers.

*Biography:* Noah Slowik (he/him) is a second-year English MA student at the University of Vermont, a Graduate Research Assistant for the Writing in the Disciplines Program, and a Consultant for the Graduate Writing Center. His thesis is on the geopolitics of aviation in H. G. Wells, and he has worked as a Teaching Assistant for a Geology, Physics, Philosophy, and Literature interdisciplinary Extraterrestrial Life course.

## Works Cited

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