

Contemporary Retellings of Shakespeare

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Jane Smiley's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *A Thousand Acres* (1991) presents a modernization of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, reframing the familiar narrative of the play to the contentious family relations and secrets of an Iowa farm family.

Many authors and filmmakers have taken a similar approach, with modernizations of Shakespeare's plays often providing readers and viewers with the opportunity to reflect on Shakespeare's timeless themes and stories, right alongside the profound ways in which dynamics of gender and power have shifted—and sometimes how they haven't—over the past four centuries.

Screening Shakespeare in the '90s

Several films presented modernized versions of Shakespeare in the late 1990s and early 2000s, in the wake of Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, including:

- Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996)
- Gil Junger's *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999)
- Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000)
- Tim Blake Nelson's *O* (2001)
- Billy Morrisette's *Scotland, PA* (2001)

These films take a range of approaches to bringing Shakespeare's stories into the 20th century. For example, Luhrmann and Almereyda notably retain Shakespeare's original language, while other directors pair the contemporary setting with modern dialogue, while still building upon the narrative foundation of Shakespeare's plays. *Romeo + Juliet* is filmed with Luhrmann's signature frenetic style, while Junger's *10 Things I Hate About You* adopts the cinematic conventions of the romantic comedy and the teen movie, and Almereyda's style is influenced by modern technologies, including surveillance camera-style footage and closed-circuit television. These films also run the gamut of genre, from the teenage tragedies of *Romeo + Juliet* and *O* to the introspective meditation of *Hamlet*, from the romantic comedy of *10 Things I Hate About You* to the much darker comedy of *Scotland, PA*.

Young Adult Retellings of Shakespeare

Many of the modernized film versions of Shakespeare's plays, including *Romeo + Juliet*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, *O*, and Andy Fickman's *She's the Man* (2006) are teen movies,

designed to make Shakespeare accessible and inviting for a younger audience. A range of young adult literary retellings of Shakespeare's stories appeal to that same audience, often while simultaneously creating space for groups of people whose stories have often been marginalized or silenced.

The theme of star-crossed lovers and familial expectations continues to resonate in contemporary retellings of *Romeo and Juliet*: Jacqueline Woodson's *If You Come Softly* (1998) focuses on the forbidden teenage relationship of a Black boy and a Jewish girl at a Manhattan prep school. Sometimes it's the family business that gets in the way, which is the case in Jennifer Dugan's queer YA novel *Verona Comics* (2020), where in addition to romantic hurdles, there is the families' big-box store vs. independent comic books store conflict. A similar dynamic is at play in Alana Quintana Albertson's *Ramón and Julieta* (2022), where the feuding families helm a taco chain restaurant and sea-to-table taqueria, respectively.

Ambition and vengeance are at the heart of several *Macbeth* retellings, including Robin Talley's YA thriller *As I Descended* (2016) and Hannah Capin's *Golden Boys Beware* (originally published with the title *Foul is Fair*, 2020), both of which interrogate and explore themes of privilege and entitlement. *Golden Boys Beware* foregrounds dynamics of gender and power, in the story a young woman who seeks her revenge after one of the school's "golden boys" sexually assaults her, a trauma which is also central to E.K. Chesterton's *Exit, Pursued by a Bear*, a modern retelling of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*.

Dahlia Adler's edited collection *That Way Madness Lies* (2021) provides a snapshot of the different approaches and perspectives brought to YA Shakespeare modernizations, presenting fifteen short story retellings of many of Shakespeare's comedies, tragedies, histories, and even a sonnet (Brittany Cavallaro's riff on "Sonnet 147"), retold from a wide range of diverse perspectives.

In each of these cases, the authors endeavor to make Shakespeare's timeless work accessible and appealing to a young adult audience by resituating the stories within contemporary settings and expanding the scope of what type of characters get to take center stage.

Hogarth Shakespeare

While YA settings shift their focus and characters to appeal to younger readers, Shakespeare's work continues to resonate with adult literary fiction readers as well, like those who were captivated by Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*. This literary approach to modernizing Shakespeare's work is reflected in the Hogarth Shakespeare series, in which acclaimed contemporary authors develop their own retellings of Shakespeare's plays.

The Hogarth Shakespeare series was published between 2015 and 2018, and includes:

- Jeanette Winterson's *The Gap of Time* (2015), based on *The Winter's Tale*
- Howard Jacobson's *Shylock Is My Name* (2016), based on *The Merchant of Venice*
- Anne Tyler's *Vinegar Girl* by Anne Tyler (2016), based on *The Taming of the Shrew*
- Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed* (2016), based on *The Tempest*
- Tracy Chevalier's *New Boy* (2017), based on *Othello*
- Edward St. Aubyn's *Dunbar* (2017), based on *King Lear*
- Jo Nesbø's *Macbeth* (2018), based on *Macbeth*

Each of these authors' retellings explores the complex connections between Shakespeare's familiar characters while positioning them in new settings and contexts, as well as drawing on a range of genre permutations that offer a new lens for canonical stories, like the family drama of St. Aubyn's *Dunbar* and Tyler's *Vinegar Girl*, or Nesbø's reworking of *Macbeth* as a crime drama.

Conclusion

With each of these approaches to Shakespeare, authors and filmmakers simultaneously celebrate the Bard's timeless stories, while reworking them for a contemporary audience, highlighting the ways in which Shakespeare's work is both timeless and perennially adaptable, resonating with the human experience more than four hundred years later.