

**“MORE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH”:  
NEW DIRECTIONS IN *HAMLET* ADAPTATIONS**

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**Abstract**

Hamlet seems to be everywhere, from t-shirts encouraging the drinking of “two beers or not two beers” to advertisements for everything under the sun. Hollywood has entered the fray with its box-office animated hit *The Lion King* or the popular motorcycle gang television series *Sons of Anarchy*, to name but a few examples. We would seem to have reached Hamlet overload. Does the Prince of Denmark have anything left in the tank for contemporary readers of serious fiction?

This paper will examine three recent Hamlet adaptation novels: Lisa Klein’s *Ophelia* (2006), Ian McEwan’s *Nutshell* (2016) and Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet* (2020). The above-mentioned novels will be used to exemplify three of the most frequent current approaches, all amounting to forms of intertextuality: the Joycean, involving tracing links between Shakespeare’s life and the plays; the Stoppardian, consisting of spin-offs of the play focusing on characters other than Hamlet himself; the ‘updating’ approach where the bare bones of the plot of the play are employed for a narrative taking place in the present day. Hamlet, despite his fears of falling into oblivion, very much lives on “to tell my [his] story” (Shakespeare, 5.2.302).

**Keywords**

Adaptations, Shakespeare, contemporary novel, *Hamlet*, intertextuality

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IN line with Hamlet’s dying appeal to Horatio to not allow his fate to fall into oblivion, writers have continued to return to the tale of the Prince of Denmark up to the present day. The same holds true for Shakespeare’s plays in general of course as is evidenced by the recent Hogarth Shakespeare project,<sup>1</sup> among other things. The adaptations come in many forms: novels, theatre plays, films, short stories, comics and even computer games. While some adaptations attempt to retell or at least update Shakespeare’s original play, others use the plot as inspiration to branch off in new directions.

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<sup>1</sup> See my recent paper dealing with three of the Hogarth Shakespeare novel adaptations (Livingstone, in press), or Krajník and Weiss’s essay on *Hag-Seed*, Margaret Atwood’s re-imagining of *The Tempest*, published within the project (Krajník and Weiss 2021).

In an attempt at formulating a systematic approach, I have divided the recent adaptations into three categories, acknowledging of course that this is far from definitive. All of them rely, to varying degrees, on intertextuality. The three novels chosen for analysis are the following: Lisa Klein’s *Ophelia* (2006), Ian McEwan’s *Nutshell* (2016) and Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet* (2020).

I call the first of the three categories the Joycean approach, making reference to the musings of Stephen Dedalus in the Irish National Library in the Scylla and Charybdis chapter in *Ulysses*, where the young semi-autobiographical character pontificates to his literary acquaintances on links between Shakespeare’s personal life and the plots of his plays, *Hamlet* in particular. Although much of what Stephen theorizes about is not wholly original or even meant in sincerity, this finding of parallels between Shakespeare’s life and art has continued to inspire creative approaches, in this particular case, the recently published novel *Hamnet*.

The second could be called the Stoppardian approach, in connection with the classic of the Theatre of the Absurd *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* from 1967. Tom Stoppard chooses to focus on two minor characters from the play with only brief appearances by Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude and others. These adaptations take the form of offshoots or spin-offs of sorts of the main plays. Lisa Klein’s novel *Ophelia* from 2006, later made into a film from 2018, embodies this approach.

The third and final category is the most experimental and arguably least faithful to the original Shakespearean text. These works consist of present-day retellings and/or updatings, where the connection with the original play is often less than apparent or obvious. Ian McEwan’s remarkable *Nutshell* from 2016, in contrast to many less successful experiments, will be used to exemplify this approach.

These categories are not of course completely clear-cut and definitely tend to overlap and even blend into one another.

The most recent adaptation is by the Northern Irish novelist Maggie O’Farrell whose ninth published book *Hamnet* has met with universal critical acclaim. The attention is very much deserved in particular for the way in which Anne Shakespeare (Hathaway), called Agnes in the novel, is portrayed, not only when coming to terms with the death of her beloved son, but in general. In contrast to almost all of the fictional treatments of William Shakespeare and his family, she is refreshingly not portrayed as a harri-dan who drives her husband away from home and into the arms of London. As Germaine Greer has pointed out in her extremely insightful and influential book *Shakespeare’s Wife*, Anne is inevitably proclaimed guilty without any actual evidence. The most famous example of this is in the hit film *Shakespeare in Love* where Anne is dismissed in mere passing as a mistake when the playwright tries to get back on the good side of his love interest Viola.

The connection with Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* is not, of course, as developed as is the case in the other two novels discussed below. The book makes much over the bewitching parallel between the name *Hamnet* and the name of Shakespeare's tragedy, even invoking the authority of Stephen Greenblatt who argues that the names are two variants of the same name in a kind of preface to the novel (O'Farrell 2020). Whether this is true or not is debatable and beyond the realm of my expertise, but the book seems to ignore the obvious fact that *Hamlet* was not a name dreamed up by Shakespeare, but a personage (fictional or not) taken from the *History of the Danes (Gesta Danorum)* by Saxo Grammaticus. James Joyce, through his alter-ego Stephan Dedalus, of course popularized this notion of there being a connection between the play *Hamlet* and Shakespeare's premature deceased son Hamnet: "To a son he speaks, the son of his soul, the prince, young Hamlet and to the son of his body, Hamnet Shakespeare, who has died in Stratford that his namesake may live for ever" (Joyce 1960, 188–89).

O'Farrell makes this connection integral to the conclusion of her novel when Agnes, almost four years after the death of Hamnet, finds out about the production of the play and makes her one and only trip to London to confront her husband about it. She is maliciously informed about her husband's seemingly callous decision by her stepmother Joan: "Because of course he would never call it that without telling you first, would he, without your by-your-leave?" (O'Farrell 2020, 343)

Agnes is initially furious about her husband's insensitivity (an issue which has been building up for years): "There has been some odd, strange mistake. He died. This name is her son's and he died, not four years ago" (O'Farrell 2020, 344). Upon arriving in London, she makes her way to her husband's lodgings only to be told he is at the theatre on the other side of the Thames. She notices, however, a letter addressed to her with only the salutation attached thus far. The reader later learns that Shakespeare has been working up to write her about this sensitive decision to write the play using their late son's name and is resolved to do so after the performance of the play: "He will cross over the river, go back to Bishopgate and write to his wife, as he has been trying to, for a long time. He will not avoid the matter in hand. He will tell her about this play. He will tell her all. Tonight. He is certain of it" (O'Farrell 2020, 355).

Determined to hate what her husband has dared to do, she is won over in the end while watching the play. The characterization by the actor playing the role of Hamlet in the play has apparently been based on their son and has even been provided by her husband with the mannerisms and appearance of the beloved lost Hamnet: "Her son, her Hamnet, is dead, buried in the churchyard . . . Yet this is him, grown into a near-man, as he would be now, had he lived, walking with her son's gait, talking

in her son’s voice, speaking words written for him by her son’s father” (O’Farrell 2020, 365). Agnes finally acknowledges the beauty of the tribute her husband has created to their son’s life and memory. The poignancy of the scene is enhanced by O’Farrell making use of the legend that Shakespeare actually played the role of Hamlet the father’s ghost:

Hamlet here, on this stage, is two people, the young man, alive, and the father, dead. He is both alive and dead. Her husband has brought him back to life, in the only way he can. As the ghost talks, she sees that her husband, in writing this, in taking the role of the ghost, has changed places with his son. He has taken his son’s death and made it his own; he has put himself in death’s clutches, resurrecting the boy in his place. (O’Farrell 2020, 366)

Although Greenblatt, like myself, is very much sceptical concerning the main premise of the novel, he does provide a heart-felt tribute to her accomplishment in a review of the book by referencing Ben Jonson’s emotional tribute to his own deceased boy, “On My First Son”:

But I too am convinced that Shakespeare drew upon his grief and mourning to write the astonishing, transformative play that bears his son’s name. With her touching fiction O’Farrell has not only painted a vivid portrait of the shadowy Agnes Hathaway Shakespeare but also found a way to suggest that Hamnet was William Shakespeare’s best piece of poetry. (Greenblatt 2021)

The novel *Ophelia* by Lisa Klein attempts to give a voice to Hamlet’s love interest in the play. The book consists of a fairly straight-forward first-person narration from the age of ten or so. Ophelia is brought up by her father, she is a tom boy, who enjoys books and learning, much more so than her brother Laertes. The characterization would seem to have been influenced by Virginia Woolf’s influential ponderings concerning a sister of Shakespeare in *A Room of One’s Own* who is as equally talented and imaginative as her brother, but never provided with the support to pursue her artistic dreams. Brought into the court as a lady-in-waiting to Gertrude, she develops a crush on Hamlet from a young age. She is also interested in herbs and poultices, becoming a healer, hereby sharing this feature with the Agnes character in *Hamnet*.

The novel frequently interjects lines from the original play, sometimes in unexpected and surprising places. When bantering flirtatiously with Hamlet, now as a teenage girl, for example, she boldly answers one of his cheeky comments and is complimented as follows by the young Prince: ““She scored a hit, a palpable hit!” Hamlet cried, and staggered as if pierced by a sword. ‘Sharp as a rapier is this lady’s

wit” (Klein 2006, 54). This seems to be the beginning of Ophelia’s ardour being returned by the young Prince. Ophelia, for a change, anticipates Hamlet’s words from the play upon their next meeting. ““Still I am beating my wings against the walls of my cage,’ I said ruefully, ‘for Elsinore sometimes seems a prison to me.’ Instantly I regretted my words, for I did not wish to seem ungrateful. ‘I only wish that I could freely come and go—”” (Klein 2006, 59). Echoing the lines of Hamlet’s first soliloquy in act one scene two, the Prince also paraphrases his own famous lines:

“There is disease in Denmark. My father is not two months dead, his flesh still clings to his bones, and yet my mother takes a new husband. Indeed it is the cold funeral meats that furnish today’s wedding table,” he said bitterly, speaking more to himself than to me. (Klein 2006, 98)

The lovers end up marrying in clandestine, along the lines of *Romeo and Juliet* with only Horatio as a witness, and come up with a scheme to fool their parents and the court:

“I have a plan, husband,” I said brightly, touching his arm to regain his attention. “What better way to hide that we are married than to pretend a courtship? You shall pursue me, for my father believes that you do. I will deny you and seem the virtuous daughter, while we steal secret kisses from each other.” “Yes! We will feign love to hide love. This is a paradox I will act with pleasure,” said Hamlet, leaning in to kiss my throat where my heartbeat was visible. (Klein 2006, 129)

At times the paraphrases and citations come across as irritating. ““Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!’ he cried, seizing his forehead in his hands. His face was twisted with agony. Was he rehearsing the role he meant to play at that night’s entertainment?” (Klein 2006, 141). These summaries of the speeches from the play seem occasionally contrived and forced. The present writer at least ends up feeling like he is being talked down to somehow, with everything being over-explained.

In contrast to the play, Polonius is killed by a guard and Hamlet is framed for the murder. Ophelia does a Juliet-like trick of feigned death and is rescued from the grave by Horatio. In line with Hamlet’s famous insulting dismissal in the play “Get thee to a nunnery” (Shakespeare, 3.1.122), she escapes to a convent, eventually bearing his child and finally receiving the following from Horatio:

The letter bore, alas, Horatio’s news of the death of Hamlet and the ruin of all Denmark. *The final fruits of evil have spilled their deadly seeds . . . It was the sight of his dying mother that spurred Hamlet’s revenge at last . . . Laertes and Prince Hamlet have slain each other . . . I have failed in the*

*task you set me . . . Forgive Hamlet . . . he loved you deeply.* Horatio’s words filled my veins with sorrow and touched my heart like the quickest poison, bringing blackness like the oblivion of death. (Klein 2006, 242)

She becomes the convent doctor/healer and finally gives birth to a son, revealing her true identity to the nuns in residence: “My son’s name is Hamlet, as was his father’s, and he is a prince of Denmark” (Klein 2006, 302). In the epilogue to the novel, Klein provides the tale with a romantic happy ending with the arrival of Horatio at the convent, who informs Ophelia of her husband’s final words.

“I held Hamlet as he took his last breath. He and your brother forgave each other their wrongs. That much I did achieve.”

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“Hamlet lamented that he left behind a name so wounded, and he bade me tell his story, which I do still.” (Klein 2006, 324)

Ophelia and Horatio are in love and live happily ever after with young Hamlet, who will perhaps one day return for his rightful kingdom. It seems the story is ripe for a sequel.

Lisa Klein in a conversation with an anonymous interviewer at the end of the novel actually acknowledges her debt to Tom Stoppard, “I enjoyed and admired *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, and, like Stoppard, I wanted to write ‘between the lines’ of *Hamlet*, weaving Ophelia’s story into the existing time frame of *Hamlet*” (Klein 2006, 334). Stoppard did not, of course, do anything of the sort, but instead employed the minor characters to undertake something highly original and distinct, which unfortunately cannot be said for Klein’s novel or the mediocre film which it served as the basis for. *Ophelia* seems to have been hampered by its insistence on keeping too strictly to the bare bones of the original plot of the play. One wonders if this Stoppardian approach might be better suited to the theatre or perhaps the short story.

One highly original example of the latter is the delightful short story “Yorick” by Salman Rushdie from 1982, a self-proclaimed “cock-and-bull story” (Rushdie 1982, 81) which turns the entire plot of the play on end, making young Hamlet the killer of his father, by means of Yorick, in a fit of jealousy over the jester’s attractive, but ill-smelling wife Ophelia. Hamlet’s crime, however, comes back to haunt him leading to something along the lines of the original plot of the play.

Haunted by the phantom of his crimes, he starts to lose his reason. His own Ophelia he treats badly, as you know; his cracking brain confuses here with the unbearable memory of the fool’s foul-smelling wife . . . and (to cut

this short) at last the prince, who once turned speech to poison, drinks from a poisoned cup. (Rushdie 1982, 80)

The difference in skill and ingenuity is immediately apparent, while Klein's book ponderously moves along in predictable fashion, Rushdie's story bursts with invention.

The same could very much be said for the last novel subject to the current analysis, Ian McEwan's recent *Nutshell*, which takes place in the present-day in London. The novel's title comes from act two scene two of the play when Hamlet first greets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and gives voice to his melancholy and depression, "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams" (2.2.252–55).

McEwan imagines his yet unnamed Hamlet as just that, bounded "upside down in a woman. Arms crossed, waiting, waiting and wondering who I'm in, what I'm in for" (McEwan 2016, 1). The Hamlet-foetus, in the nine month of pregnancy, is certainly not at peace, but is instead a helpless eavesdropper to the plotting of his mother Trudy and his uncle Claude to murder his poet father John and inherit his valuable house in London. The novel is told in the first-person from the baby's helpless perspective: "My mother *is* involved in a plot, and therefore I am too, even if my role might be to foil it. Or if I, reluctant fool, come to term too late, then to avenge it" (McEwan 2016, 3).

Old Hamlet in this version is a middle-aged, overweight struggling poet, who is not only being cuckolded by his businessman brother, but also apparently exploited by younger poets whose careers he is trying to further:

Various of my conjectures have proved wrong in the past, but I've listened carefully and for now I'm assuming the following: that he knows nothing of Claude, remains moonishly in love with my mother, hopes to be back with her one day soon, still believes in the story she has given him that the separation is to give them each "time and space to grow" and renew their bonds. That he is a poet without recognition and yet he persists. That he owns and runs an impoverished publishing house and has seen into print the first collections of successful poets, household names, and even one Nobel laureate. When their reputations swell, they move away like grown children to larger houses. (McEwan 2016, 10–11)

In contrast to his father, who "knows by heart a thousand poems" (McEwan 2016, 11), his uncle Claude is a boorish property developer whose conversation is full of pompous inanities, and to insult to injury, always seems to be ready and willing

to have sex with the expecting mother. McEwan hilariously captures the indignity of poor baby Hamlet’s predicament:

Not everyone knows what it is to have your father’s rival’s penis inches from your nose. By this late stage they should be refraining on my behalf. Courtesy, if not clinical judgement, demands it. I close my eyes, I grit my gums, I brace myself against the uterine walls. This turbulence would shake the wings off a Boeing. My mother goads her lover, whips him on with her fairground shrieks. Wall of Death! On each occasion, on every piston stroke, I dread that he’ll break through and shaft my soft-boned skull and seed my thoughts with his essence, with the teeming cream of his banality. Then, brain-damaged, I’ll think and speak like him. I’ll be the son of Claude. (McEwan 2016, 21)

There is no doubt that this manages to ingeniously invigorate the, occasionally time-worn and stale, Freudian reading of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

McEwan once again includes direct citations and variants of some of the original lines of the play, but here with much more ingenuity and pizzazz. Instead of the would-be warrior comparison with mighty Hercules in act one scene two, we have “but no more like my father than I to Virgil or Montaigne” (McEwan 2016, 33). Another fresh play on the lines from the original play consists of a updated commentary of the “What a piece of work is man” (Shakespeare, 2.2.293–308).

But lately, don’t ask why, I’ve no taste for comedy, no inclination to exercise, even if I had the space, no delight in fire or earth, in words that once revealed a golden world of majestic stars, the beauty of poetic apprehension, the infinite joy of reason. These admirable radio talks and bulletins, the excellent podcasts that moved me, seem at best hot air, at worst a vaporous stench. The brave polity I’m soon to join, the noble congregation of humanity, its customs, gods and angels, its fiery ideas and brilliant ferment, no longer thrill me. (McEwan 2016, 91)

McEwan’s ongoing references to the technological and social developments of twenty-first century Europe, and England in particular, make baby Hamlet’s existential concerns about the future particularly relevant, managing to touch on many of the concerns young people are having about the future and whether it makes sense to be born into this world at all or procreate. The foetus narrator learns about the mounting ills of the world through the podcasts his mother listens to. This is only part of the horrors he is being exposed to: “Profitable and poisonous agriculture obliterating biological



beauty. Oceans turning to weak acid. Well above the horizon, approaching fast, the urinous tsunami of the burgeoning old, cancerous and demented, demanding care” (McEwan 2016, 26–27).

The treatment of the actual murder is innovative and witty, involving poisoning John with a smoothie. After the fact, Claude is slick and remorseless, while Trudy is ‘complicated’ to say the least. She is initially very much in with the plan, only to be plagued by remorse. With the police closing in on the two accomplices, things begin to turn sour. Just as they are about to make a run for it to the Continent, Trudy’s water breaks. Upon realizing she is not going to be able to escape, she decides not to face her punishment alone and hides Claude’s passport. Trudy gives birth to the hero of the novel with Claude’s begrudging assistance. The novel comes to an end with the police at the door to arrest them and the new-born staring up at his treacherous mother:

My mother moves me so we can exchange a long look. The moment I’ve waited for. My father was right, it is a lovely face. The hair darker than I thought, the eyes a paler green, the cheeks still flushed with recent effort, the nose indeed a tiny thing. I think I see the entire world in this face. Beautiful. Loving. Murderous. I hear Claude cross the room with resigned tread to go downstairs. No ready phrase. Even in this moment of repose, during this long, greedy stare into my mother’s eyes, I’m thinking about the taxi waiting outside. A waste. Time to send it away. And I’m thinking about our prison cell – I hope it’s not too small – and beyond its heavy door, worn steps ascending: first sorrow, then justice, then meaning. The rest is chaos. (McEwan 2016, 198–99)

In contrast to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the novel closes with the main protagonist’s life only beginning, but “the rest is silence” (Shakespeare, 5.2.311) for the voice of our baby hero.

Kate Clanchy in a review for *The Guardian* expresses what many people probably thought upon hearing about the premise behind the novel: “This may not sound like an entirely promising read: a talking foetus could be an unconvincing or at least tiresomely limited narrator, and updatings of Shakespeare often strain at their own seams” (Clancy 2016). McEwan’s novel nevertheless succeeds in providing a truly fresh take on the often re-told and re-hashed tale of Hamlet the Dane.

Clanchy’s characterization of certain less successful “updatings,” and adaptations in general, in her review is unfortunately generally the rule not the exception. As is the case with literary treatments of Shakespeare the man, the less faithful and reverent adaptations tend to be (in many cases, certainly not all) the most interesting.<sup>2</sup> All three of the novels include actual quotations from *Hamlet* and other works

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this issue, see Livingstone 2019.

by Shakespeare. This technique can become trying and annoying at least in the present author’s opinion; *Nutshell* is most able to successfully pull it off, while *Ophelia* overindulges.

There will undoubtedly be further new directions in the future, a case in point being the current film release *The Northman* directed by Robert Eggers which claims to return to the source material on Hamlet or Amleth. Shakespeare’s text is nowhere to be seen in the film, but is amply compensated for by brutal violence and attention to period details and costumes. There will certainly be new adaptations to come exploring gender issues, queer politics, science fiction renderings, etc. (animals have already been tried with *The Lion King*, but perhaps something along the lines of *Flush* by Virginia Woolf or the novel *Shakespeare’s Dog* by Leon Rooke may be in the workings).<sup>3</sup> It is also a given that international adaptations will continue to flourish placing the plot in new, exotic locales (Kashmir, India in Vishal Bhardwaj’s film *Haider*, 2014); California’s Central Valley (in the motorcycle gang television series *Sons of Anarchy* by Kurt Sutter, 2008–2014), among others. Hamlet’s story will continue to be told and retold, in both familiar and less recognizable forms “in this harsh world” (Shakespeare, 5.2.301).

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<sup>3</sup> Both of these novels are told from the perspective of a dog, a canine belonging to Elizabeth Barrett Browning in the former case and one belonging to Shakespeare himself in the latter.

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