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# Criminal Appropriations of Shakespeare in Jasper Fforde's *Something Rotten*

Patricia R. Taylor

Shakespeare is serious—if frighteningly funny—business in Jasper Fforde's genre-bending “Thursday Next” series, which consists of *The Eyre Affair* (2001), *Lost in a Good Book* (2002), *The Well of Lost Plots* (2003), *Something Rotten* (2004), and *First Among Sequels* (2007).<sup>1</sup> Throughout the series, British author Fforde depicts characters who appropriate Shakespeare's plays and their cultural capital in displays of transgressive or destructive power; for example, police incarcerate actors for poorly performing *Twelfth Night*, a dictator enlists Shakespeare's missing play *Cardenio* in establishing his totalitarian power over England, and, in a fit of pique over her maltreatment by the Prince of Denmark, Ophelia replaces every copy of *Hamlet* with *The Tragedy of the Fair Ophelia, Driven Mad by the Callous Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Through these scenes, and others like them, Fforde's series criticizes attitudes

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towards Shakespearean appropriations. While Erica Hatley has (in the context of Fforde's use of *Jane Eyre*) accused Fforde of employing "conservative reading strategies" that work to limit the potential meanings of texts by emphasizing the importance of authorial intent (2005, 1022-23), I argue that within the series, readers' violent rewritings of texts—especially Shakespeare's texts—are deemed dangerous but valuable, and work to undermine the importance of authorial intent in determining meaning. Within the series, appropriating Shakespeare's plays can be criminal, but the novels subsequently undermine this criminality to demonstrate that the potential dangers of appropriation are not necessarily exploitative or oppressive, but liberating. While governments, corporations, and some criminals use the cultural capital available in Shakespeare's plays for oppressive ends, individual readers are invited to counter these appropriations with dangerous but liberating interpretations, revisions, and appropriations of their own.

Fforde's series is a fictional foray into the ongoing scholarly debate over the relationship between Shakespearean appropriations and destructive, violent, or repressive force. This debate has focused extensively on the different ways groups or individuals use the cultural power found in Shakespeare's texts. Some scholars suggest that appropriations have the potential to "abuse" texts or their audiences; for example, such different critics as Alan Sinfield and Richard Burt argue that appropriations of Shakespeare's texts can perform ideological violence. Sinfield has shown how institutions like governments or corporations often do "violence to the perceived text," in order to help sustain oppressive systems (1992, 20, 26). Burt, by contrast, finds that "popularizing" Shakespeare has often damaged how Shakespeare's texts are used in American culture; he argues that associating popular Shakespeare with youth culture has led, first, to a "dumbing down" of Shakespeare (Burt 1998, 2), and second, to versions of Shakespeare's plays that "legitimate . . . repressive notion[s]" about women (2002, 206). These two scholars, and others with them, have focused on criticizing how groups "[wrest] something of value from unwilling or hostile hands" (Lanier 2005, 5). From these perspectives, some forms of appropriation are destructive, and scholars must resist them.

However, the current scholarly use of the term "appropriation" more generally "tends to enforce a neutralizing sense of the transformation," and allows the term to be used without such negative connotations (Hedrick and Reynolds 2000, 6). This usage reflects the fact that many critics now disagree with the idea that appropriations are destructive or dangerous in some form. Douglas Lanier argues that the term "appropriation" now describes a variety of textual activities that might be "better explained in terms of negotiation, collaboration, exchange, and other models" (2005, 5). Similarly, Diana Henderson has argued that adaptations or appropriations are better under-

stood as “diachronic collaborations,” a term which focuses “attention on the connections among individuals, allowing artists credit and responsibility, but at the same time refusing to separate them from their social location and the work of others” (2006, 8). These alternative models, particularly of collaboration and exchange, offer ways for individual readers, not just members of corporations, governments, or institutions, to use Shakespeare’s texts.

In entering the scholarly debate on the danger, or lack thereof, of Shakespearean appropriations, Fforde’s novels demonstrate that appropriations can be simultaneously collaborative and transgressive: we need not neutralize the term’s transgressive connotations in order to validate the acts the term represents.<sup>2</sup> The novels emphasize that readers grounded in popular culture can subvert oppressive uses of Shakespeare by appropriating Shakespeare’s texts for themselves. Within the Fforde universe, such appropriations are considered dangerous because they are usually violent and destructive, but they can nevertheless serve constructive purposes. Fforde’s novels demonstrate this by, first, literalizing metaphors drawn from reader response theory to comment directly on how appropriations function, creating a world in which readers can actually change the text of the books they read and thus determine the meaning of Shakespeare’s plays for themselves; these readers become diachronic collaborators with Shakespeare as they literally change the words on the page. However, these collaborations are always in some way violent because they erase the original texts from existence. Second, Fforde’s novels both raise the cultural capital of Shakespeare’s texts and increase the consequences for transgressive or violent appropriations, making them criminal. These crimes either use literature or deface it to demonstrate the ways literature can help individuals and groups gain or maintain power. Third, the novels show how the myth of Shakespeare’s universal genius limits readers’ ability to determine the “meaning” of the plays, and the novels work to overturn this myth by pointing to Shakespeare’s own appropriations of earlier texts. Moreover, *Something Rotten*’s appropriation of *Hamlet* and other canonical texts demonstrates the potential power of less-than-reverential appropriations. The novels respond to the claim that appropriating Shakespeare is dangerous in some forms by suggesting that reading, interpreting, and appropriating Shakespeare is dangerous and powerful in *all* forms, and that we should embrace the potential dangers.

Fforde wrote the first four novels of the series as installments of a single overarching storyline, but his heaviest discussions of appropriations and Shakespeare occur in the first and fourth books in the series (2004b).<sup>3</sup> Fforde dramatizes the appropriation process by creating a twofold world: the Outland, inhabited by “real” people, and the BookWorld, inhabited by characters of novels, poems, and plays. The narrator of the series, Thursday Next,

is part of a select group who can move easily and intentionally between the Outland and the BookWorld (an act called “bookjumping”). To briefly summarize the series, in *The Eyre Affair*, Thursday works as a Literary Detective, or Literatec, for a government agency that polices crimes against books in the Outland. However, when a villain terrorizes Outland readers by kidnapping and murdering cherished fictional characters, Thursday chases him through the back-stories of various novels, culminating in a confrontation in *Jane Eyre*. In the process, Thursday changes the ending of *Jane Eyre*: while Outland readers are used to a version in which Jane marries St. John and goes to India with him, Thursday burns down Thornfield Hall and calls Jane back to Rochester, transforming the novel into the text that Fforde’s readers expect. *Lost in a Good Book* reveals that the BookWorld has its own policing agency called Jurisdiction (which “maintain[s] the integrity of popular fiction,” [Fforde 2002, 161–62]) that charges Thursday with the crime of changing *Jane Eyre*, while simultaneously recruiting her to work for them. In her dual position of Literatec and Jurisdiction agent, Thursday tries to stop Yorrick Kaine, a Hitler-like character from the BookWorld, from using a stolen copy of *Cardenio* to rise to political power in the Outland. *The Well of Lost Plots* focuses on Thursday’s adventures in the BookWorld. In *Something Rotten*, Thursday continues to fight Kaine even as she must keep BookWorld characters from taking control of *Hamlet* for their own purposes.

Fforde’s worlds emphasize readers’ abilities to determine the meaning of texts by employing a reading theory that parallels (or perhaps appropriates) Wolfgang Iser’s reader response theories. Iser argues that readers provide the information or ideas to “fill in the gaps” of a text, and he explains that literary texts are “full of unexpected twists and turns, and frustration of expectations” (1974, 279). These twists and turns are “gaps” that every reader must grapple with, filling them in by means of their expectations, but revising those expectations as they read. Because these expectations originate with the reader, and every reader’s approach to filling in these gaps will be slightly different, an almost infinite number of interpretations are possible. Thursday uses a version of Iser’s reader response theory in *Something Rotten* to explain how Outlanders read and experience texts:

Each interpretation of an event, setting or character is unique to each of those who read it because they clothe the author’s description with the memory of their own experiences. Every character they read is actually a complex amalgam of people that they’ve met, read, or seen before. . . . Because every reader’s experiences are so different, each book is unique for each reader. (Fforde 2004a, 21)

However, Thursday’s description, while accurately representing Iser’s reader response theory, ultimately does not reflect how all readers within the nov-

els actually create meaning for the texts they read. Her examples are merely superficial; the language of “clothing” in the description suggests only surface level changes. For Thursday, the reader simply makes the text real to the reader’s own mind, rather than adding anything substantial to it. The idea that characters are “complex amalgams” of people the reader knows does not necessarily mean the reader has any significant ability to construct meaning in the process of reading. There is no interpretation, and the “gaps” in the text are not filled in so much as glossed over.

Fforde’s novels, however, offer a view of readers that is much more active and complex. If texts contain gaps that must be filled in, readers may actively, rather than passively, determine how they should be filled in. The novels create the possibility for such active participation by allowing some Outlanders to literally enter texts through gaps, and once there, to change the narrative. One character, Victor Analogy, describes the relationship between the world of a reader and the world of a text, and the gaps that readers can slip through and fill: “The barriers between reality and fiction are softer than we think; a bit like a frozen lake. Hundreds of people can walk across it, but then one evening a thin spot develops and someone falls through” (2001, 206). Analogy describes accidental bookjumping, but bookjumping may be intentional as well, as it is with Thursday. In either case, the inter-permeability of the world of the reader and the world of a text opens both to change. When reading involves actually entering books, either metaphorically or literally, texts become subject to new forces and vulnerable to appropriations. Thursday’s changes to *Jane Eyre* are just one example of how readers who fall through a gap can alter a text. While Iser’s theory describes how a text is responsible for shaping a reader’s response—it “frustrat[es]” the reader’s expectations—Fforde extends and literalizes reader response theory so that different interpretations of a text manifest as appropriations with cultural and textual power: every time someone reads a text, he or she commits an appropriative act.

Yet Fforde’s use of reader response theory is by no means a straight-forward extension of an academic approach to reading. Instead, Fforde chooses to poke fun at reader response theory on his website when discussing his research on *Hamlet*, with the apparent intent of explaining away the large number of potential readings of the play: “Everyone seemed to have their own ideas on the Great Dane, from the ludicrous to the intractable, from the simplistic to the unintelligible. Working on the theory that since the worthy and doubtlessly brilliant academics could not *all* be correct I figured that nobody actually has the least idea what is going on and it is up to the individual to interpret the Dane as they see fit” (2004b). Fforde appears to intentionally misrepresent reader response theory in order to divest academics of

their institutional authority to determine the meaning of Shakespeare's play. He does so in order to authorize the interpretations of lay readers—including himself—who may “interpret the Dane as they see fit.” Reader response theories are part of the institutional structures that might use Shakespeare's authority for their own power, and so Fforde appropriates them as violently as he does the literary texts he treats in his novels, alternately incorporating and challenging them to make his point.

Fforde's novels use the idea of gaps not only to describe the reading practices of characters within the books, but also as part of a meta-textual framing of the series.<sup>4</sup> Penguin Books markets *The Eyre Affair* in part through the metaphor of falling through gaps, as the dustcover of the U.S. hardcover edition uses a reference to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*: “Based on an imaginary world where time and reality bend in the most convincing and original way since *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, *The Eyre Affair* is a delightful rabbit hole of a read: once you fall in you may never come back.” The metaphorical fall indicates that the reader enters willingly into the world of a text and accepts it completely. Within the series, Fforde establishes Thursday's world as an alternate reality or universe that borrows extensively from our own without being bound by its rules.<sup>5</sup> As a genre, alternate-reality fiction requires readers to momentarily give up their own world and accept the rules of the alternate reality. Yet, as Fforde's appropriation of reader response theory suggests, readers are sometimes frustrated when they confront the gaps that exist between their own world and the world of the text. Moreover, it is precisely when these gaps are most obvious that Fforde undermines the very world he has created.

One such gap between our world and Thursday's is the criminality of appropriation. Appropriations, especially of Shakespeare's plays, are criminal because the cultural capital of all things “Shakespeare” is significantly higher in the Outland and Bookworld than it is in our world; the increase in value raises the stakes for appropriations, giving them potentially greater power and consequences. Thursday's world is built upon the destruction of the high-brow-lowbrow distinction that exists for literature, in some ways following a “fantasy of a once-again popular Shakespeare, freed from the shackles of highbrows and [literary] professionals and returned to the ‘people’” (Lanier 2002, 18). However, in Thursday's world Shakespeare is popular not because he has been removed from the realm of literary professionals or the cultural elite, but because he belongs to both the popular and elite groups, as do all authors, whether writers of romance novels or of the literary canon. There are professors and students who study literature, but prominent experts are just as likely to be associated with fan groups or the police as with universities; Thursday and her fellow Literatecs are just such experts. In Thursday's

world, *Richard III* plays weekly in a theater for more than a decade, but it functions like *The Rocky Horror Show*, where members of the audience regularly take over for actors and otherwise participate in the performance. Ultimately, Shakespeare and other authors enjoy a sort of popularity in the Thursday Next universe that far surpasses even the most obsessive fan communities in our world while maintaining the academic and cultural value that we associate with Shakespeare but not Star Trek. Shakespeare's writings are simply the most valuable of texts in a world where books are standard currency.

The obsessive appreciation of Shakespeare's plays and the subsequent increase in the cultural capital are the primary reasons why many appropriations of literary texts—especially Shakespeare's—are criminal within the world(s) of the novels. When there is no distinction between high and low culture, bad readings and misappropriations cannot simply be disdained as trash, mistakes, or the product of a lack of education. Everyone—even the cops—must treat them as if they have real consequences for people's lives. In *The Eyre Affair*, the detectives who fight crimes against Shakespeare are “the most prestigious” Literatecs, and the novel opens with “big criminal gangs [who] had moved in on the lucrative literary market” by attempting to pass off a “flagrantly unrealistic version of Shakespeare's lost work, *Cardenio*” (Fforde 2001, 146, 2). In the Outland, criminals are those who misappropriate Shakespeare: an evil henchman pushes “thespian interpretation to the limits” by “[killing] Laertes for real while playing Hamlet,” and he attempts to blackmail the English Shakespeare Company into putting on a performance of *Midsummer Night's Dream* with chainsaws (156, 159).<sup>6</sup> Literatec Bowden introduces Thursday to her job in Swindon by describing the Shakespearean crime unit and their recent arrest: ““They keep an eye on forgery, illegal dealing and overtly free thespian interpretations. The actor in with them was Graham Huxtable. He was putting on a felonious one-man performance of *Twelfth Night*. Persistent Offender. He'll be fined and bound over. His Malvolio is *truly* frightful”” (133). Crimes in this world are often those of appropriation, interpretation, and simply “frightful” performance, but if Shakespeare's works were not so valuable, there would be no need to criminalize these activities. By associating “overtly free . . . interpretations” of Shakespeare with criminals, the inhabitants of Thursday's world seem to shut down the possibility of ever accepting full or free appropriations of Shakespeare.

For Fforde's readers, who are used to a distinction between high and low culture, these criminal activities at first seem like plot devices developed for humorous effect rather than any sort of real statement on appropriations. Killing people onstage or trying to pass off forgeries worth billions of dollars seem like crimes worth punishing in any world, but a poorly performed



Malvolio appears insignificant in the grand scheme of things. However, the novels force readers to reevaluate their decisions about what constitutes an unacceptable appropriation when Thursday's changes to *Jane Eyre* are added to the mix of illegal activities. While Thursday asserts that she "did what [she] did for the best," and she is thanked for saving the book from being destroyed altogether, she is nonetheless deemed responsible for changing the course of the narrative (Fforde 2002, 291). She is put on trial and forced to defend her actions in court in *Lost in a Good Book*, and she is convicted in the course of *Something Rotten*.<sup>7</sup> Thursday's trial and conviction demonstrate that all criminal appropriations are manifestations of the problems created by the high cultural value of literary texts. Thursday's worlds—both the BookWorld and the Outland—require that the cultural capital of texts remain stable; poor performances, forgeries, and changes to plots all destabilize texts' established value. Eventually, Thursday internalizes the perspective that appropriations destabilize such value, and she comes to enforce the very laws that made her a criminal.

However, the series eventually questions Thursday's acceptance of these laws in *Something Rotten*, as Thursday becomes an antagonist for various characters who attempt to appropriate *Hamlet* and other Shakespeare plays from within. The most troubling of these appropriations (for Thursday) occurs when Ophelia rewrites *Hamlet* to reflect her reading of *Hamlet* as a misogynistic jerk. Ophelia performs a "a coup de état" using a technique common in fan appropriations of texts, reorienting and telling the story from another point of view: she imports a lesser *Hamlet* from *Lamb's Shakespeare* to help her reinterpret key scenes "with a pro-Ophelia bias" (Fforde 2004a, 114). Thursday's response to Ophelia's new text is simply to shut it down, treating Ophelia's revisions as just another criminal act: "'She's always up to something, isn't she? I'll give her 'Hey nonny, nonny.' Tell her to get back into line or we'll slap a Class II Fiction Infraction on her so fast it will make her head spin" (114). A Class II Fiction Infraction is, ironically, the same charge that Thursday herself received after her changes to *Jane Eyre*.

Ophelia's changes are criminal because they destabilize the value of the text by violently erasing the original text of *Hamlet*, just as Thursday's changes to *Jane Eyre* erased the earlier version of the novel. The fear of erasure in the Thursday Next series is similar to the fear expressed by Shakespeare scholars such as Sinfield and Burt when they decry certain types of appropriation. For Sinfield and Burt, in re-writing or appropriating a Shakespearean text a particular way, another more liberal or liberating way of reading it becomes unavailable to the audience of the appropriation (the most obvious example of such erasure might be found in Disney's effects on fairy tales). Within the series, Ophelia's revision of *Hamlet* is transgressive not

because of her political agenda, but because in appropriating the play she has erased the original text by writing over it. Thursday, as a representative of Jurisdiction, unblinkingly accepts the notion that the original text is more valuable than any appropriation or revision can ever be.

Fforde's novels criticize Thursday's acceptance of such criminalization by framing many appropriations as acts of liberation and inviting readers to view them as such. Ophelia, for example, escapes the misogynist control Hamlet had over his text, and she is eventually given control of her own play that does not replace *Hamlet*. Henry Jenkins has identified strategies like Ophelia's as a form of textual criticism typically employed by "disenfranchised fans" who are allowed no other place or way to engage in scholarly conversation (1992, 86–87). Ophelia's appropriations take the place of scholarly debate and empower the disenfranchised fan; the novels encourage the reader to feel admiration for her tenacity in the face of opposition from Thursday, and amusement at her bold approach.

Other examples from the series demonstrate even more clearly how appropriating texts can be liberating and positive, even when original texts are destroyed permanently. Some individuals from the BookWorld applaud Thursday's changes to *Jane Eyre* because they improve the novel; for characters within *Jane Eyre*, the aesthetic improvements have the side benefit of liberating them from the tyranny of narrative. Rochester, for example, tells Thursday that her "intervention improved the narrative," rather than damaging it (Fforde 2001, 190). Characters like Rochester are aware that they are characters—they behave like actors performing assigned roles—and often feel trapped. Thursday's violent changes to the end of *Jane Eyre*, including burning down Thornfield Hall, literally free the characters from their prescribed roles, and offer them alternatives they could not have even considered before Thursday's changes.<sup>8</sup>

*Something Rotten* extends the notion from *The Eyre Affair* that appropriations can be liberating, and suggests that this is especially true of Shakespearean texts because of their cultural power. The appropriations of Shakespeare in *Something Rotten* overturn the idea that appropriations are criminal and instead suggest that the very dangers posed by changes, challenges, and misreadings are potentially valuable aspects of reading. While Thursday represents the views of the law that she is sworn to uphold, she overlooks the inconsistencies between what her own appropriations do and what she says about them, and between how she sees events and what their actual consequences are. Thursday's description of reading practices, which I quoted earlier, focuses on surface-level elements brought from the reader's mind and applied to the text. In her discussion of reading, while she does not deny the possibility of a more proactive construction of meaning or inter-

pretation, neither has she fully considered what such active reading might look like, perhaps because she does not treat the characters from books as readers the way the series does.

BookWorld characters can be both readers and actors, able to construct the meaning of the text for themselves, and many take advantage of this potentially liberating power. For example, at the beginning of *Something Rotten*, Hamlet leaves his play and enters the Outland to, first, discover why he is considered dithering and indecisive, and second, to rectify the situation. In the process, he becomes a representative of the sort of individual Fforde says has the right to interpret the play as he or she sees fit. Once Hamlet learns of Mel Gibson's role in Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*, he becomes obsessed with "filling in the gaps" by reading *Hamlet* through Gibson's other films, asking Thursday if Danny Glover (from Mel Gibson's *Lethal Weapon* series) plays Horatio (Fforde 2004a, 70). Hamlet initially reads his own story in much the way that Thursday had suggested all readers read: through the lens of experience, though Hamlet's experience is that of popular culture rather than real life. Yet, Thursday tries to correct Hamlet, telling him "the *Lethal Weapon* series is nothing like *Hamlet*," because his reading does not consist of the superficial changes that Thursday had in mind, but instead substantially revises how the play could be understood. Hamlet counters Thursday's statement by arguing that each of Mel Gibson's characters—whether Hamlet, Martin Riggs, or Max from *Mad Max*—follows the same path from self-doubt to becoming "a decisive man of action [who] kills all the bad guys" (70). Though there is certainly an element of wish fulfillment in his reading, Hamlet's ability to refute Thursday speaks to the great power Fforde attributes to readers. Even if Thursday is not convinced by his comparison, neither does she have an effective rebuttal.

Hamlet's conflation of actors with text (which makes sense given his emergence from the BookWorld in which actors *are* text) is used mostly for laughs, but his readings become increasingly radical and transgressive as the novel progresses, and ultimately culminate in political action. When Hamlet suggests to an actor that he watch Mel Gibson's version in order to improve his own performance, the actor takes offense, and the disagreement is settled in a tavern by a "*Hamlet* contest" where Hamlet and various actors perform the "To be or not to be" soliloquy. Hamlet loses the contest by a substantial margin because "he insisted on playing the soliloquy less like an existential question over life and death and the possibility of an afterlife, and more about a postapocalyptic dystopia where crossbow-wielding punks on motorbikes try to kill people for their gasoline" (Fforde 2004a, 154). Hamlet has grafted his view of Mel Gibson in all his various roles onto his understanding and appropriation of Shakespeare and his own character. While filmmaker

Zeffirelli intended to create such an association in his casting of Gibson (Hopkins 2005, 2), Hamlet takes it perhaps too far—certainly too far for Thursday or the inhabitants of her world. Hamlet does not merely use Gibson to see himself as a revenger, instead transposing the whole text of Gibson’s other films onto his role.

If ever there was a case of criminal interpretation in Thursday’s world, Hamlet’s appears to be it. However, *Something Rotten* ultimately affirms the importance of violent but liberating appropriations through Hamlet’s use of Mel Gibson. Hamlet sees the Gibson/Zeffirelli reading as a way of reconstructing himself as a leader, capable of powerful political action: “By this time tomorrow, *Hamlet* will be a dynamic tale of one man’s revenge and rise to power as the single greatest king Denmark has ever seen. . . . There’s something rotten in the state of Denmark, and Hamlet says . . . it’s payback time!” (Fforde 2004a, 313).<sup>9</sup> Hamlet puts his new (though temporary) decisiveness to political work by helping Thursday take down the would-be totalitarian dictator Yorrick Kaine. The allusion to *Hamlet* in Kaine’s name alone makes him a formidable opponent in Thursday’s world, but this is also the man who initially rose to power by appropriating the cultural capital of Shakespeare’s missing play *Cardenio*.

Kaine’s ability to stay in power depends primarily on the destruction of texts; because he, like Hamlet, is a character from the BookWorld, he needs to destroy all the copies of his original text in order to keep Thursday from returning him to his proper place. His chosen method is to persuade an England enamored with books to burn all books by Danish authors or with Danish heroes. But Hamlet’s newfound conviction that he can be “the greatest king Denmark has ever seen” is instrumental in disrupting Kaine’s plans as Hamlet threatens to rally a base of readers of Daphne Farquitt (a Danish romance novelist whose books are being burned) to resist Kaine.<sup>10</sup> However, Hamlet’s reading of his own play as a symbol of Danish rather than English power is a direct response to Yorrick Kaine’s appropriation of the specifically English cultural power grounded in Shakespeare.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Hamlet destabilizes the institutional power Kaine had used to control the text by reorienting the text in light of popular culture—especially popular culture that for Fforde’s readers is distinct and separate from academic or high culture.

Kaine’s grab for power and Hamlet’s resistance demonstrates the central tenet of the series: “popular” readers often create the appropriations that are best suited to counter institutional or oppressive uses of Shakespeare’s texts. While the Outland government and institutions forbid individual appropriations because of the ideological currency available in such appropriations, it is almost impossible for a reader in a world where reading and appropriation are inextricably linked to not make use of that currency. Hamlet is one such

reader of his text as he uses Gibson's films to understand his own play, and Ophelia is another as she uses strategies that we would associate with fans rather than academics.

In this way, Fforde relies on the gap between our world and the Outland in order to make his point, as Hamlet and Ophelia are "popular" only for readers who still maintain distinctions between popular and elite or academic cultures. For Fforde, the best response to oppressive readings or appropriations is not scholarly but popular and fictional. While Alan Sinfield argues that it is primarily, though certainly not exclusively, the scholarly community's "task . . . to prevent such 'documents of civilization' [from] being coopted to enhance the plausibility of oppressive stories," Fforde suggests that such responsibility—and capabilities—lie primarily in the hands of readers and fans like Hamlet and Ophelia (1992, 26). Scholars are more like Thursday, who becomes a part of the very system that demands fidelity to texts over the possibility that those texts may be used for liberation. It is Thursday's task, rather than Ophelia's, that is ultimately deemed untenable: Thursday fails to shut down Ophelia's revisions or to charge her with a crime, and Ophelia is given her own book, so long as she promises to leave the text of the original *Hamlet* alone (Fforde 2004a, 158). Characters compare Ophelia's revision of Shakespeare to Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, and *Something Rotten* ultimately treats Ophelia's revision with the same legitimacy as Stoppard's play. Ophelia's interpretation, while on one level a parody of fan fiction, gives a voice to the oppressed character and survives despite Thursday's threats.

In leaving both Ophelia's revisions and the original play intact, the novels remind readers that in our world, erasing meaning is rarely full or complete. Ophelia's revisions are much like Fforde's own novels in that both revise characters for their own purposes, and Ophelia's text does not erase *Hamlet* any more than *Something Rotten* does. The novels develop this principle in order to further combat the notion that Shakespeare's texts can be irreparably damaged by appropriation, even appropriations that are oppressive. Shakespearean texts can withstand aggressive appropriations in our own world because Shakespeare's place within the canon—central to it and symbol of it—means, to a certain extent, that the "original" texts cannot be easily erased by contemporary appropriations. Readers can question an oppressive interpretation by returning to the original text and developing their own interpretation or appropriation of it, even if that process is difficult.

The novels remind readers that Shakespeare's plays are themselves historical evidence of the valuable power of appropriations, though they take a roundabout route to reach this point. Ophelia's initial appropriation leads to a proliferation of interpretations and appropriations of *Hamlet*: first, she is

joined by her father and brother—fellow disenfranchised readers—in rewriting the play as *The Tragedy of the Very Witty and Not Remotely Boring Polonius, Father of the Noble Laertes, Who Avenges His Sister, the Fair Ophelia, Driven Mad by the Callous, Murderous and Outrageously Disrespectful Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (Fforde 2004a, 115). Next, *Hamlet* becomes the target of a hostile takeover by *The Merry Wives of Windsor*; the resulting play “features Gertrude being chased around the castle by Falstaff while being outwitted by Mistress Page, Ford, and Ophelia. Laertes is the king of the fairies, and Hamlet is relegated to a sixteen-line subplot where he is convinced that Doctor Caius and Fenton have conspired to kill his father for seven hundred pounds” (159). Appropriations spiral out of control, causing readers to lose sight of any original moment or text. Because this appropriation happens in the BookWorld, these changes are, like Ophelia’s, theoretically permanent.

According to Thursday, the destruction of the original text is the most crucial problem, but she does not see the creation of a separate text as the option it was in Ophelia’s revisions: either the texts will return to their original states, or the merged text will replace both. However, Thursday’s criticisms of the merger raise questions about whether the appropriation should be dismissed because of its destructive nature alone. Thursday explains that book mergers have happened before, and she cites *King Lear* as an example—it was the product of merging *Daughters of Lear* and *Sons of Gloucester*. “Other potential mergers, such as *Much Ado About Verona* and *A Midsummer Night’s Shrew*, were denied at the planning stage and hadn’t taken place. It could take months to extricate the plots, if it could be done at all. *King Lear* resisted unraveling so strongly we just let it stand” (Fforde 2004a, 159). Thursday alludes to the fact that appropriations are naturally a part of Shakespeare’s plays. While popular conceptions of Shakespeare do not usually figure him as an appropriator or adaptor, far more of his plays are adaptations than original plots. For example, *King Lear* integrates the story of King Lear and his daughters (from the anonymous Elizabethan play *King Leir*, as well as Holinshed’s *Chronicles* and Spencer’s *The Faerie Queene*) with the story of Gloucester and his sons (adapted from the story of the blind king found in Sir Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia*). Moreover, combined with her allusions to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Thursday’s reflections on the merger remind us that Shakespeare’s plays appropriate other texts in ways that often seem violently opposed to their original purpose: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* appropriates the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe via the performance of the rude mechanicals, turning it into a comedy, much as Fforde’s novel comedifies Shakespeare’s plays, especially *Hamlet*. Fforde thus draws on Shakespeare’s appropriative methods to support the potential constructive nature of adaptations and appropriations, even as his main character fights against them.

The series elucidates the difference between what Thursday says about appropriations and how appropriations actually work in her world through her means of extricating *Hamlet* from *The Merry Wives of Elsinore*. Her solution is to find a clone of Shakespeare created decades earlier by the Goliath corporation (in yet another attempt to exploit the cultural capital available in any association with the Bard), and have him write new manuscripts of both plays, thus “rebooting” the texts. Fforde’s series challenges Thursday’s approach by mercilessly destroying the mythical image of Shakespeare’s genius as a purveyor of universal truths, and in doing so reinforces the right that individual readers have to appropriate Shakespeare’s texts.

As Ton Hoenselaars and Paul Franssen have pointed out, authors as characters are usually meant to be “authoritative figures whose ontological status is assured within the framework of fiction” (1999, 23). Shakespeare, in particular, holds a significant amount of authority as a character. He has, according to Michael Bristol, “achieved contemporary celebrity” (1996, 3) and is more recognizable than any other author (though he is also the most malleable authorial figure as well [Castaldo 2004, 95]). Moreover, popular culture is usually the site where the “mythic Shakespeare is forged and disseminated” (Lanier 2002, 112). In contrast with most other popular depictions, Fforde’s novels refuse to romanticize Shakespeare, particularly as a source of authorial genius. While at various points in *The Eyre Affair* Thursday debunks the arguments made by various groups who do not believe that Shakespeare wrote his own plays, doubt still lingers, so she asks her time-traveling father to check into the matter. He reveals a time-travel paradox concerning Shakespeare’s plays, announcing that he traveled back to 1610 and discovered that *no one* had written Shakespeare’s plays: “They don’t exist. They were never written. Not by [Shakespeare], not by anyone” (Fforde 2001, 369). He goes on to explain that he took a copy of the complete works and gave them to the actor Shakespeare to disseminate. For a moment, the sense of authorship in the plays is completely destroyed; the plays are literally timeless. In *Lost in a Good Book*, the time travel paradox is further complicated by the revelation that the “complete works” Thursday’s father gave Shakespeare in 1592 actually only contained eighteen plays. Thursday suggests that Shakespeare may have started writing his own plays because the ones he had been given were so popular.

Fforde never answers the questions this paradox raises: we never learn how the texts are first generated, or which plays were in the original collection, or if there are substantial differences between the ones in the original collection and the ones the actor may have written. Because the texts have no author, there can be no appeal to authority, no way to control the text except through adaptation and appropriation, and these appropriations, as we

have seen, are no more stable than the original text. Fforde seems to leave the questions open to make a theoretical point about Shakespeare's authority as the source of meaning for his plays. By the time we turn to *Something Rotten*, the paradox is long forgotten by Thursday, but its implications lurk in the background. While Thursday is convinced that Shakespeare did pen the plays, and therefore his clone can be used to recreate *Hamlet* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the myth of Shakespeare's genius fares no better in *Something Rotten* than it did in the earlier books. The Shakespeare clone Thursday discovers is no Joseph Fiennes of *Shakespeare in Love* fame:

We turned to find a small man with wild, unkempt hair standing at the doorway. He was dressed in Elizabethan clothes that had seen far better days, and his feet were bound with strips of cloth as makeshift shoes. He twitched nervously, and one eye was closed—but beyond this the similarity to the Shakespeares Bowden had found was unmistakable. A survivor. I stepped closer. His face was lined and weathered, and those teeth he still possessed were stained dark brown and worn. (Fforde 2004a, 289)

The image of Shakespeare as a pitiful, unkempt man with a nervous twitch is problematic for Thursday as she attempts a return to authorial intent as the determiner of meaning by seeking out the genetic origin of the plays. There is no sense of the potential genius that Thursday hopes Shakespeare will embody.

Thursday appears to realize this fact when she is confronted with the notion of not one, not two, but dozens of Shakespeares, none of whom could recreate the original's genius: "I tried to imagine the whole room full of Shakespeare clones clattering away at their typewriters, their minds filled with the Bard's plays, and scientists moving amongst them trying to find one, just *one*, who had even one half the talent of the original" (Fforde 2004a, 290). Thursday's imaginings play on the joke of millions of monkeys sitting at typewriters and eventually recreating all of Shakespeare's works; she finds that, like the monkeys, hundreds of Shakespeares are incapable of creating anything approaching the historical Shakespeare's perceived genius.<sup>12</sup> When she reads the writings of the last living Shakespeare clone, Thursday claims that they are "disappointingly, nothing special at all—merely scraps of existing plays cobbled together to give new meaning" (290). Yet, as we have already seen, in Fforde's novels *King Lear* is the result of the meshing of two plays, "cobbled together to give new meaning," and Shakespeare's greatest plays are defined by their appropriations of other texts. By this standard, there is "nothing special at all" about the original Shakespeare. The sheer irony of the situation undermines Thursday's hope that the Shakespeare clone, whose work is defined as the meshing of plays to create new meaning, can save the two plays being destroyed by their merger.



*Something Rotten* resolves the irony perhaps too neatly, as the pitiful Shakespeare clone manages to create new manuscripts of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Hamlet*, despite the suggestion that he might not be able to do so. While the manuscripts ultimately return Hamlet, Ophelia, and all the other characters to the realm of texts that are in some way confined by the physical realities of manuscripts and bound books, *Something Rotten* does not return meaning to the author who penned the text. Hamlet's final conversation with Thursday before returning to the BookWorld demonstrates that he has learned to see himself as the product of multiple readings, "that there are many Hamlets and we love each of them for their different interpretation" (Fforde 2004a, 372). He states that he now believes the play is popular because readers can see that "my failings are *your* failings, my indecision is the indecision of you all." While we might say Hamlet's identification with his audience's failings and indecision glorifies the universal, timeless nature of Shakespeare's observations, in the context of the rest of *Something Rotten* his words are better read to mean that Hamlet is popular only so long as his failings are the failings that we as readers construct for him. His indecision is the indecision we, not Shakespeare, create for him.

Fforde's novels provide a model for popular appropriations of literary texts, and while it may comfort us, as it does Thursday, to think that authors like Shakespeare are in control of their texts, Fforde's novels demonstrate that such control is an illusion perpetuated to deny readers the dangerous but liberating power of appropriations. Thursday's ability to control Shakespeare's clone, to get him to author new manuscripts, suggests that readers create not only the meaning of texts, but of authors as well. The disappointing clone becomes genius via Thursday's appropriation of his genetic makeup to serve her own purposes. While Thursday never fully realizes the implications of what she has done, her actions remind readers that in reality texts cannot change themselves, but are dependent upon readers for meaning. Appropriations are such meanings put into practice; they are dangerous because they are *active*, involved with the world. While some appropriations, like Kaine's, may deserve to be considered criminal or oppressive, Fforde pushes his readers to consider that their own readings ought to be more transgressive and more liberating. Shakespeare's plays are central to this argument because they both model appropriation and demonstrate how texts confer power on those who read and appropriate them.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fforde's first novel, *The Eyre Affair*, was infamously rejected seventy-six times before being published. However, the novel proved to be incredibly popular both in Britain and in the US, where it made the New York Times Bestseller List in 2002.

<sup>2</sup> *The Eyre Affair* uses the term "appropriation" to denote legalized theft; the Goliath Corporation, the evil monolithic company that governs more of society than the government itself, is said to "appropriate" whatever it wants from whomever it wants, and always for nefarious designs (Fforde 2002, 168).

<sup>3</sup> I do not think *First Among Sequels* negates any of my arguments, but the time gap of sixteen years and a substantial change in the substance of Thursday's world in the intervening time makes the focus of the fifth novel significantly different, and largely irrelevant to this paper.

<sup>4</sup> It could be a particularly useful avenue for further research to pursue Fforde's relationship to other writers, such as Italo Calvino, who construct metafictional and metatextual worlds.

<sup>5</sup> Other changes in Thursday's world include the fact that the Crimean War is still being fought, dodo clones can be made in anyone's kitchen, and England no longer has a monarchy. Thursday's time-traveling father suggests that her world is an alternate history of our own, as he visits a world suspiciously like our own in an attempt to "fix" the history of his. Fforde is, of course, by no means the first to use the idea of connected-but-separate alternate universes or histories. It is difficult to cite a single literary source or author for popularizing the device; we can look back to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) as the most obvious source of the idea for Fforde. Since then, the notion has become a staple of science fiction and fantasy literature, appearing in the work of authors as diverse as Jorge Luis Borges (in "The Garden of Forking Paths" [1941]), Fritz Lieber (in his Hugo award-winning novel *The Big Time* [1958]), and Philip Pullman (in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy [1995-2000]).

<sup>6</sup> The English Shakespeare Company has replaced the Royal Shakespeare Company in Fforde's world because the monarchy no longer exists.

<sup>7</sup> She is eventually sentenced to wear a blue gingham gown for twenty years and read the ten most boring classics.

<sup>8</sup> Erica Hatley points out that Thursday's changes effectively link Thursday with Brontë "in that she 'authors' some of the novel's most famous (or infamous) episodes in a style that a Brontë Federation member describes as 'pure Charlotte Brontë'" (2005, 1033); moreover, Thursday alters *Jane Eyre* so that it now matches what we, the readers of Fforde's novels, would expect when reading *Jane Eyre*. Hatley uses this ironic "change" to argue that Fforde's novel emphasizes the importance of authorial intent to determine meaning. However, while Thursday intends some of her changes, others are accidental. Moreover, Thursday is identified not just with Brontë, but also with readers of Brontë's novel; *Jane Eyre* is, in this sense, literally authored by its reader.

<sup>9</sup> There seem to be allusions here to two other Gibson films where violence defines his character: *Braveheart* (1995) and *Payback* (1999).

<sup>10</sup> This summary is, admittedly, a vast oversimplification of the novel's convoluted events, which also include time-traveling gamblers doubling as religious prophets, genetically engineered Neanderthals, and "SuperHoop," the world championship for a sport that is a cross between croquet, rollerball, and American football.

<sup>11</sup> The other potential source of specifically English power would be Milton, but he is conspicuously absent from *Something Rotten*, in a literal sense: "Milton" is the title of the missing chapter thirteen (Fforde 2004a, xiii). While Milton is certainly popular in Thursday's world—evidenced by the 112<sup>th</sup> Annual John Milton Convention that occurs during *The Eyre Affair*, and the number of people who rename themselves in his honor (at least 496)—Fforde hints at the need to have Shakespeare clearly ensconced as the foremost English poet without any competition for the purposes of the plot (2002, 106, 129).

<sup>12</sup> The US hardcover edition of *Something Rotten* uses a visual image of this moment to set the tone for the whole novel: the frontispiece includes a clipboard with eight busts of Shakespeare based on the Flower Portrait, each sitting at a typewriter while a man in a lab coat takes notes. In the background is a window, with five hills, each with a grave marked with a cross (suggesting other, dead Shakespeares), and the caption, "I tried to imagine the whole room full of Shakespeare clones clattering away at their typewriters. . ." (Fforde 2004a, unpagged).

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