SECRET CODES AND SMALL REWRITES: FLUID AUTHORSHIP, INTERTEXTUAL GAMES AND THE POWER OF WORDS IN *DOCTOR WHO*—"THE SHAKESPEARE CODE" AND OTHER REVISITATIONS OF SHAKESPEARE

Lucia Opreanu
Ovidius University of Constanța

ABSTRACT
The paper aims to analyse one of the most recent recontextualizations of Shakespeare's life and work in a 2007 *Doctor Who* episode in an attempt to establish the extent to which such popular culture endeavours can contribute to a better understanding of canonical literature, particularly by placing the words of the past in a vast intertextual web and providing new insights into phenomena such as authorship and reception. Far from being confined to "The Shakespeare Code," the analysis will also explore the use of similar strategies in British literature (Anthony Burgess – "The Muse"), popular theatre ("Hamlet: A Small Re-write") and television comedy (*Blackadder Back & Forth*), as well as mainstream cinema (*Shakespeare in Love*), with an emphasis on issues such as collaborative writing and literary appropriation and on the alternative accounts of the genesis of Shakespearean texts featured in some of these narratives.

KEYWORDS: authorship, canon, intertextuality, originality, popular culture, reception

When Persse McGarrigle, the naively enthusiastic lecturer of David Lodge's *Small World: An Academic Romance*, announces his intention to write "a book about the influence of T.S. Eliot on modern readings of Shakespeare" (380) at the fictional 1979 Rummidge conference, the only representative of the publishing trade in attendance counteracts the polite bafflement of the surrounding academics by pointing out the market potential of such a project: "the libraries will buy almost anything on either Shakespeare or T. S. Eliot. Having them both in the same title would be more or less irresistible" (280). Several decades later, a survey of the vast array of recent studies targeting various recontextualizations of Shakespeare's works reveals not only his pervasive presence in a wide range of popular media (Rokison-Woodall 4) but also the emergence of a similarly fashionable topic from the momentous encounter between the "Center of the Canon" (Bloom vii) and the protagonist of the longest-running science-fiction series in the *Doctor Who* episode "The Shakespeare Code." Arguably, the critical attention attracted by Shakespeare's consistent appearance in popular culture (Rokison-Woodall 4) has moreover helped confirm Jonathan Culler's hopeful speculations that, far from killing literature by

BDD-A26202 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:00:16 UTC)

"encouraging the study of films, television, and other popular cultural forms" (48), cultural studies might actually revive the sometimes arid landscape of literary criticism by "providing new contexts and increasing the range of issues" (49) for those classical texts that still resonate with contemporary audiences.

In this particular instance, the Doctor and his companion travel back to 1599 London just in time to stop a race of humanoid female aliens from using Shakespeare's newly finished *Love's Labour's Won* as a weapon to bring about a "new empire on Earth," a "world of bones and blood and witchcraft" activated by the "right combination of words" from "a mind like no other," delivered "at the right place, with the shape of the Globe as an energy converter" (Palmer). However sacrilegious traditional academia might consider this contamination of the "'haven' from 'sci-fi nutters'" (Hills 161) the "apotheosis of Capital-C 'Culture'" (Hills 160) seemed to provide, it is quite difficult to take umbrage at the episode's almost "unconditional reverence" (Hills 163) towards the epitome of "human aesthetic creativity" (MacRury and Rustin 105) and the power that can be channelled through his main medium: "a theatre's magic, isn't it? You should know. Stand on this stage, say the right words with the right emphasis at the right time. Oh, you can make men weep, or cry with joy. Change them. You can change people's minds just with words in this place" (Palmer). Arguably, the sense of awe is "counterposed with a good measure of irreverence" (MacRury and Rustin 110) particularly visible in Shakespeare's parody of celebrity antics—"No autographs. No, you can't have yourself sketched with me" (Palmer)—and the clash between the Doctor's somewhat inflated expectations and the seemingly prosaic reality:

> DOCTOR: Now we're going to hear him speak. Always he chooses the best words. New, beautiful, brilliant words.
> SHAKESPEARE: Ah, shut your big fat mouths!
>
> (Palmer)

Nevertheless, even die-hard Bardolaters might find it difficult to improve upon the idea that, of all the intelligent life forms on the countless populated planets in the infinite number of parallel universes within the Doctor's jurisdiction, Shakespeare is "the one true genius" capable of averting the danger originally unleashed by his own "new and glittering" words (Palmer) and saving the human race from extinction and the rest of the cosmos from "the millennium of blood" (Palmer).

It is also worth pointing out that of all the attempts to capitalize on the success of Dan Brown's bestseller in explorations of "something lost or unknown about the ancient works" of a British rather than Italian visionary (Cawley and Terranova 161), the BBC episode is the only one that pays tribute to the historical William Shakespeare, exploring and expanding "the myth of Shakespeare as author" (MacRury and Rustin 105–106), using "Shakespeare not merely as a source of cultural authority, but rather to 'popularise' his works" (Hills 162) and ultimately reconfirming "Shakespeare's credentials as a producer of popular entertainment while reimagining him as simultaneously a local, 16th-century theatre celebrity and a literary timeless and universal (or rather cosmic) celebrity-genius" (Wyse 178–

BDD-A26202 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:00:16 UTC)

179). Unlike Virginia M. Fellows' *The Shakespeare Code*—a somewhat sensational novel revolving around the secret code allegedly used by Francis Bacon to "conceal his work in books published under his own name and under the names of Shakespeare, Spenser, Marlowe and others of the time" (Fellows xiii)—and Brenda James' *Henry Neville and the Shakespeare Code*—an analysis of the rather insubstantial evidence pointing to the real author of the plays and poems attributed to "the Stratford pretender" (James 40)—the script written by Gareth Roberts to fit the already familiar 'celebrity historical' narrative template (Chapman 226) perpetuates the *Doctor Who* tradition of honouring "British-banknote historical figures" (MacRury and Rustin 106) by "revisiting significant moments, or rather mysteries and lacunae in literary history, in order to assimilate high culture, or at least literature" (Wyse 178) to the popular culture of their own age as well as to that of the viewing public.

While Shakespeare is by no means the first literary celebrity featured in a *Doctor Who* episode, this "highly fictionalised historical reimagining of Shakespearean spectatorship" (Purcell 158) is made particularly memorable by the profusion of analogies to be drawn between two apparently distant universes. Some of these connections, such as the similar function of the Tardis and the Globe—"Small wooden box with all that power inside" (Palmer)—and the intellectual compatibility between the Elizabethan wordsmith and the Gallifreyan wanderer—"We're alike in many ways, Doctor. [...] All these years I've been the cleverest man around" (Palmer)—are openly commented on by the protagonists themselves; others, such as the common thread of personal loss and grief, can only be decoded by viewers familiar enough with the series to be able to equate the death of Shakespeare's son with the disappearance of Rose, the Doctor's previous companion. Likewise, the Doctor's definition of Elizabethan drama—"Popular entertainment for the masses" (Palmer)—represents the final element in an extended analogy meant to close the gap between late sixteenth-century London and Martha's (as well as the viewers') own time and, moreover, serves to reinforce the status of the *Doctor Who* franchise as "work inhabiting the contemporary versions of such popular cultural spaces as [...] the Globe, binding quality and enjoyment and with wide appeal" (MacRury and Rustin 110) and making use of high-culture as a fertile "ground for playful (mis)quotation" (Hills 162) of a daunting array of texts.

Ultimately treating the past with the same "postmodern playfulness" (Chapman 226) familiar from cinematic endeavours such as *Shakespeare in Love*, "The Shakespeare Code" plays quite obsessively with quotations and allusion (MacRury and Rustin 114), relying on canonical plays such as *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *The Tempest*, as well as on a rich variety of popular culture products ranging from Dan Brown's bestseller to Madden's blockbuster and also featuring American short stories (Ray Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder"), British television (*Blackadder the Second*), mainstream sci-fi comedy (*Back to the Future*) and even Marx Brothers movies (*Duck Soup*). As regards the relative accessibility of such a script, much in the same way in which *Shakespeare in Love* combines "jokes aimed at Shakespeare scholars" with a series of allusions "that anyone who has survived

BDD-A26202 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:00:16 UTC)

the ninth grade in the US can enjoy" (Desmet 11), "The Shakespeare Code" uses "well-known, if not well-worn snippets from Shakespeare's works" (Wyse 179) whilst also providing "a hook for audiences versed in Shakespearean texts and mythology" (MacRury and Rustin 114) by means of references meant to "add pleasure for the knowledgeable viewer without diminishing the enjoyment of those who do not recognize the quotations" (Saidel 119).

The "centrality of borrowing" to the development of most episode plots has led more than one researcher to comment on *Doctor Who*'s status as a "cross-media creation, in a dialogue with a wide range of sources, ideas, and creative impulses" (Harmes xiv), some even arguing that "the history of *Doctor Who* is the history of adaptation" (Marlow 46). It is, therefore, particularly appropriate that "one of the most playfully intertextual of *Doctor Who* episodes" (Wyse 179) should be dedicated to a similarly omnivorous consumer of "diversely international" (Harmes xiv) sources, a "verbally acquisitive" (Wyse 180) as well as verbally innovative writer, whose "genial power" has been observed to consist not so much in being original as in being altogether receptive "to every mood, every position and disposition" (Bate 152). It is quite significant that the playwright's first encounter with the Doctor is marked by a pointed refusal to discuss one's sources—"And please don't ask where I get my ideas from" (Palmer)—especially given the fact that the Doctor is to spend most of the episode quoting "enticing phrases" which "the opportunistic playwright cannot resist appropriating for future use" (Wyse 179). Indeed, the most important motif reminiscent of *Shakespeare in Love* is Shakespeare's "literary magpie" (Purcell 160) behaviour, although in this particular case the whimsical dissolution of the "traditional notion of the originality of the 'author'" (Wyse 179) is further complicated by the "casual loop" created in the "relatively uneventful realm of literary discourse" every time the Doctor prompts lines from the plays Shakespeare has not yet written: "'All the world's a stage.' [...] 'Hmm. I might use that'" (Palmer). The intertextual dimension is further complicated by occasional instances of auctorial recognition—"I like that. Wait a minute, that's one of mine" (Palmer)—and insights into what the canon might look like if time-travel finally disrupted the one-way course of literary influence:

> DOCTOR: Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
> SHAKESPEARE: I might use that.
> DOCTOR: You can't. It's someone else's.
>
> (Palmer)

For the benefit of those viewers who might find it difficult to come to terms with the idea of the Doctor simultaneously functioning as "Shakespeare's competitor and his muse" (Marotti and Freiman 81), voicing his veneration while playfully debunking the genius as a "borrower of alien verse" (Kollias 198), it is worth observing that a considerably more dramatic version of the "chicken-and-egg paradox of Shakespeare plagiarizing from himself" (Wyse 180) is to be found in Anthony Burgess' 1984 short story "The Muse." The protagonist of this other time-travel adventure sets off into the Elizabethan past armed with a collection of the

BDD-A26202 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:00:16 UTC)

works of William Shakespeare, neatly copied "from a facsimile of the First Folio in fairly accurate Elizabethan script" on "an acid free imitation of the coarse stuff Elizabethan dramatists had been said to use" (189), fully intending to end the centuries-old debate about "whether William Shakespeare really wrote those plays" (188) by simply asking "Maister Shairkespeyr" what texts he had created to date (196). Just how misguided such an endeavour would be becomes apparent when the hapless time-traveller finds himself unceremoniously relieved of his stack of papers and dispatched to the Queen's Marshall as a dangerous lunatic, while Shakespeare settles down to examine the manuscripts. Having already confined half of the pages to the flames, the playwright belatedly realizes he is in possession of quality material, including a play about "a usurious Jew," a Marlowe-prompted idea he had already toyed with, now "ready done for him" and only requiring "copying into his own hand that questions about its provenance be not asked," as well as "a promising couple of histories, both about King Henry IV [...] a comedy with its final pages missing" and similar "godsends" (199) that he promptly sets out to transcribe, taking the opportunism of his other fictional avatars to an unprecedented level:

> He sighed and, before crumpling a sheet of his own work on the table, he reread it. Not good, it limped, there was too much magic in it. [...] Too fantastic, it would not do. He threw it into the rubbish box [...] took a clean sheet and began to copy in fair hand:
>
> 'The Merchant of Venice, A Comedy'
>
> Then on he went, not blotting a line.
>
> (Burgess 199)

Far from shedding any fresh light on the authorship controversy, "The Muse" plot is bound to leave some readers pondering on the likely nature and quality of all the potential masterpieces abandoned in favour of the prewritten gifts from the future, especially given the fact that the sample from the never-to-be-finished play featuring "Ingenio the Duke of Parma" is by no means the most surprising moment in the story's escalating series of gasp-inducing revelations. Paley's dismay at a genius's apparent failure to accept the possibility of other worlds —"You are the most intelligent man of these times! You can conceive of it!" (Burgess 198)—is easy to relate to even in the absence of unflattering comparisons with the *Doctor Who* version of Shakespeare and his matter-of-fact assessment of his new acquaintances—"You mean travel on through time and space. [...] You're from another world like the Carrionites, and Martha is from the future. It's not hard to work out" (Palmer)—yet likely to be revised in light of Shakespeare's subsequent reminiscences of previous voyagers from the less-distant future, "that Aleman, Doctor Schleyer or some such name who had come with a story like this madman" and "that one who swore under torture that he was from Virginia in America, and that in America they had universities as good as Oxford" (Burgess 199). Indeed, the playwright's admission of past appropriations—"a good line in that play about fairies Schleyer had brought [...] good plays, but not, perhaps, quite so good as these" (Burgess 199)—seems to suggest a very pragmatic and informed decision to

BDD-A26202 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:00:16 UTC)

dispose of problematic witnesses rather than a mere inability to envisage the possibility of time-travel, as do his rather cynical comments on the nature of divine inspiration: "When poets had talked of the Muse had they perhaps meant visitants like this [...] Well, whoever they were, they were heartily welcome so long as they brought plays." (Burgess 199)

An overview of fictional accounts of tampering with the Elizabethan space-time continuum would not be complete without at least one example from the opposite end of the spectrum, such as the disastrous rewriting of literary history that occurs when Blackadder, "that popular antithesis of British heritage," time-travels from the last day of the second millennium to the late sixteenth century and castigates the baffled playwright for the sins of the "official institutions that promulgate 'proper' Shakespeare" (Lanier 107) such as the academia and heritage cinema:

> That's for every schoolboy and schoolgirl for the next 400 years. Have you any idea how much suffering you're going to cause? Hours spent at school desks trying to find one joke in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, years wearing stupid tights in school plays and saying things like 'What ho, my Lord.' And 'Oh look, here comes Othello talking total crap as usual.' Oh, and that's for Ken Brannagh's endless uncut four-hour version of *Hamlet*.
>
> (Weiland)

It is quite significant, however, that for all his vehemence against the Shakespeare canon, as soon as Blackadder realizes that his virulent attack has caused the playwright to consider alternative career options—"you've heard of Shakespeare. He's the fellow who invented the ballpoint pen." (Weiland)—he rushes back into the past to rectify his mistakes and "save Britain" from what he would appear to consider a major cultural loss by means of a considerably less eloquent but apparently persuasive discourse: "I'm a very big fan, Bill. [...] Keep up the good work. *King Lear*, very funny" (Weiland).

The humour of this particular encounter derives not only from the "comic confrontation between Shakespeare and the myth he has become" (Lanier 107) but also from the intertextual joke achieved by casting Colin Firth as a diffident and maladroit Shakespeare rather than "the romantic winner" (Burt 24) less than a year after the audience saw him embodying the ludicrous Lord Wessex in *Shakespeare in Love* and being consistently thwarted and humiliated by Joseph Fiennes' debonair Will Shakespeare. Likewise, Blackadder's Brannagh-induced rage acquires further comic nuances in view of the fact that Rowan Atkinson had already voiced considerable exasperation regarding the length of that particular play whilst playing Shakespeare's long-suffering editor in the 1989 sketch "Hamlet: A Small Re-write": "It's five hours, Bill, on wooden seats, and no toilets this side of the Thames. [...] So that's why I think we should trim some of the dead wood. [...] you know: some of that stand-up stuff in the middle of the action" (Fry). To return to the main topic of this analysis, it is interesting to note that casting choices played an equally important role in the intertextual apparatus determining the reception of "The Shakespeare

BDD-A26202 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:00:16 UTC)

Code," with David Tennant as the Tenth Doctor not only linking the series "more firmly to the theatrical, Shakespearean high culture as an RSC-trained actor" but also bringing an emergent "high-cultural RSC quality intertext to *Doctor Who*" by virtue of his "simultaneous cultural status as both 'the Doctor' and 'Hamlet'" (Hills 159) in the 2008 London production. Even before the cinematic fusion between the BBC Time Lord and the RSC Lord Hamlet was heralded by announcements of a film version of Hamlet starring Tennant in the lead to be released in 2009, this intertextual dimension was further expanded by the online activity of fans of the science-fiction series, whose enthusiastic reaction to the news resulted in perhaps unwanted yet nevertheless effective publicity for the theatrical establishment, as was the case of 'The Doctor Does Shakespeare' YouTube clip, a "teaser in anticipation of the RSC production of *Hamlet*" (Holland 274) in the shape of a 24-second postmodern collage of one-word snippets of *Doctor Who* episodes arranged so as to create a fragmentary rendering of the Shakespearean line "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so."

While the main intertext in "The Shakespeare Code" is ostensibly provided by *Love's Labour's Won*, *Hamlet*'s status as the quintessential Shakespearean text and its practically undisputed place at the centre of the (universal rather than merely Shakespearean) canon—"Shakespeare and Hamlet, central author and universal drama" (Bloom 39)—as well as the episode's 1599 setting ensure that the Danish connection is not limited to casting details. The last conversation between the Bard and the visitors from the future occasions the announcement of a new project, meant to compensate not only for the loss of the other play but also for the more personal one generating "grief without measure" and "madness enough" (Palmer) to grant the Carrionites access to Earth:

> DOCTOR: Gone. I looked all over. Every single copy of *Love's Labour's Won* went up in the sky.
> SHAKESPEARE: My lost masterpiece. [...] Oh, but I've got new ideas. Perhaps it's time I wrote about fathers and sons, in memory of my boy, my precious Hamnet.
> MARTHA: Hamnet?
> SHAKESPEARE: That's him.
> MARTHA: Hamnet?
> SHAKESPEARE: What's wrong with that?
>
> (Palmer)

Martha's insistent question is the last example in a series of conspicuous interventions including the Doctor's gift of a yet unwritten line—"The play's the thing! And yes, you can have that" (Palmer)—and considerably more effort made towards ensuring the survival of one key phrase than manifested in relationship to any other intertextual prompt:

> SHAKESPEARE: It made me question everything. The futility of this fleeting existence. To be or not to be. Oh, that's quite good.
> DOCTOR: You should write that down.
> SHAKESPEARE: Maybe not. A bit pretentious? (Palmer)

BDD-A26202 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:00:16 UTC)

It is perhaps apposite to mention, at this point in the discussion, that the *Doctor Who* Bard is not the first Shakespeare avatar to question the merits of what went on to become his most iconic and endlessly quoted line, a particularly vehement debate ensuing when the infinitely pragmatic and persuasive editor / agent / producer figure in "Hamlet: A Small Re-write" attempts to cajole a cantankerous Shakespeare into reconsidering the length of the soliloquies, with a special emphasis on one he describes by means of colourful terms—"the dodgy one" and "Yawnsville" (Fry)—that even the abusive Blackadder might have shied away from:

> Editor: Bill, Bill, Bill... Why do we have to fight? It's long, long, long. We could make it so snappy... [...] How's it begin, that speech? [...]
> WS: 'To be a victim of all life's earthly woes, or not to be a coward and take Death by his proffered hand.'
> Editor: There, now; I'm sure we can get that down!
> WS: No! Absolutely not! It's perfect.
> Editor: How about 'To be a victim, or not to be a coward'?
> WS: It doesn't make sense, does it? To be a victim of what? To be a coward about what?
> Editor: OK, OK. Take out 'victim'; take out 'coward'. Just start 'To be, or not to be.'
> WS: You can't say that! It's gibberish!
> Editor: But it's short, William, it's short! Listen, it flows: 'To be, or not to be; that is the question.' [...]
> WS: You're damn right it's the question – they won't have any bloody idea what he's talking about!
>
> (Fry)

Leaving aside the likely detail that it was precisely its ambiguity that made the ruthlessly abridged line and the soliloquy containing it such an enduring text, it is quite interesting to observe that the fears voiced by this particular Shakespeare regarding the general public's ability to understand his works receive a perfect confirmation in the dialogue carried out by the *Doctor Who* thespians, even though their own playwright remains blissfully unconcerned with such mundane considerations as clarity and accessibility:

> BURBAGE: *Love's Labour's Won*. I don't think much of sequels. They're never as good as the original.
> KEMPE: Have you seen this last bit? He must have been dozing off when he wrote that. I don't even know what it means.
> BURBAGE: Yeah? Well, that goes for most of his stuff.
>
> (Palmer)

It is, moreover, worth observing that, while apparently little more than a highly irreverent insight into one of the numerous blank spots in Shakespeare's career as a playwright, "A Small Re-write" light-heartedly explores the by no means ludicrous phenomenon of "collaborative authorship or divisive labour" (Vedi 9), a

BDD-A26202 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:00:16 UTC)

"standard practice in Elizabethan and Caroline drama" (Vickers 138), whose understanding might help settle a number of literary disputes and curtail some rather long-winded arguments regarding the identity of the well-heeled genius who "unwittingly or deliberately transferred to William Shakespeare the honour of having written *Hamlet* and the other dramas belonging to the so-called Shakespeare Canon" (Vedi 10). In fact, a particularly intriguing brand of Shakespearean criticism relies on so-called "economic readings" that aim to place dramatic texts in a detailed commercial context, emphasizing "their performed state and their function as an owned, saleable commodity" not merely to "stress their joint ownership" (Aaron 17) but above all to highlight the considerable changes brought about by new props or actors and the possibility of a different artefact emerging from the revival of a familiar play in a new context.

While certain researchers might find it quite difficult to endorse such pecuniary considerations or to pursue "the notion that there might have been more hands and minds behind Shakespeare's plays" (Vedi 8) without resorting to "theories and allegations of conspiracy from one or the other parties in the authorship controversy" (Vedi 9), there is no denying the benefits of an occasional shift from the "traditional aesthetic, textual, and individualistic point of view" to a more materialistic approach "where a theatre performance is seen as exchange of a product in the market" (Vedi 11), which is precisely the sense conveyed by this particular sketch. Concerned less with artistic integrity and aesthetic principles than with "bums on seats," the editor outlines the main coordinates of Elizabethan taste whilst engaging in a painfully literal reading of the figures of speech and thoroughly massacring the original text:

> Blah blah blah blah blah, 'slings and arrows' – good! Action; the crowds love it – 'take up arms' – brilliant – 'against those cursed doubts that do plague on man' – eugh ... Getting very woolly there, Bill. Plague's a bit tasteless at the moment – we've had letters, actually. '...and set sail on a sea of troubles' – this is good: travel; travel's very popular. So let's just take out the guff and see what we've got. 'To suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take up arms against a sea of troubles.' Good!
>
> (Fry)

Having already provided the audience with a tantalizing glimpse of the surreal gems potentially lost in revision—"the avocado monologue in *King Lear*, and the tap dance at the end of *Othello*" (Fry)—and regaled Shakespeare with a magnanimous concession of his protagonist's occasional merits—"Hamlet has his moments. The mad stuff is very funny. It really is hysterical" (Fry)—the editor concludes his exposition with a trenchant (but more likely than not accurate) verdict on Elizabethan taste and the play's overall chances of success: "Let's face it: It's the ghost that's selling this show at the moment. Joe Public loves the ghost; he loves the swordfights; he loves the crazy chick in the see-through dress who does the flower gags and then drowns herself. But no-one likes Hamlet—no-one" (Fry).

BDD-A26202 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:00:16 UTC)

As regards the perpetuation of these ideas in subsequent instances of fictionalized Shakespearean biography, it can be noted that while the audience's sophistication remains distinctly underwhelming—the Elizabethan public is summarily dismissed by the Doctor as still having got "one foot in the Dark Ages" (Palmer) and by *Shakespeare in Love*'s Philip Henslowe as requiring no higher entertainment than "love and a bit with a dog" (Madden)—other incarnations of the playwright are simultaneously more attuned to contemporary realities and better equipped to defend their ideas (not to mention considerably more charismatic) than the passive-aggressive figure in "A Small Re-write." For instance, *Shakespeare in Love*'s Master Will appropriates a large number of plot twists and turns of phrase from other characters yet never relinquishes control over the text, slowly but inexorably transforming *Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter*, the eclectic medley of "mistaken identities, a shipwreck, a pirate king, a bit with a dog, and love triumphant!" (Madden) he had undertaken to deliver, into the considerably less melodramatic tale of star-crossed lovers so familiar to contemporary audiences. Likewise, the playwright in "The Stranger, the Writer, His Wife, and the Mixed Metaphor" accepts the Fourth Doctor's offer of help but is unimpressed by the observation that "to take arms against a sea of troubles" is a mixed metaphor (Bermudez Bratans 151) that had better disappear from the script.

Even a cursory glance at texts such as the *Doctor Who Magazine* short story mentioned above reveals a sufficiently different set of protagonists to indicate that the full scope of the "utopic connection between the two clever men" (Bermudez Bratans 151) and of the Doctor's contribution to *Hamlet* requires a move away from the confines of "The Shakespeare Code" and further exploration of the considerably wider *Doctor Who* universe, including not only television episodes and feature films but also comic books and long prose narratives. The latter include Justin Richards' *Doctor Who: The Shakespeare Notebooks*, a book-length account of Shakespeare's growing obsession with "the mysterious stranger known as 'the Doctor'" (Richards 2), a figure initially appearing throughout the canon "in various guises as magician, physician, academic, colleague and friend" (Richards 2) and imposing the need for subsequent adjustments to various sets of stage directions so as to "remove references to a mysterious blue box" (Richards 3). While such a text is unlikely to provide much epistemic gratification to conspiracy theorists probing for "a ghostwriter(s) behind *Hamlet*, the man (or men) who created the plot and 'told' the main story about *Hamlet*" and then "did a 'vanishing trick'" (Vedi 10) condemning posterity to worship the wrong genius, it nevertheless puts forward a new take on the authorship question, dispelling some of the TV episode's "ambiguity over the true source of such timeless, powerful, utopic words" (Bermudez Bratans 151).

As an exercise in sustained intertextuality, *The Shakespeare Notebooks* provides readers with yet another fictional account of the genesis of a famous text in "Notes on a play," part of "a record kept by Shakespeare himself over several years" (Richards 1), a section that makes consistent use of the already familiar strategy of narrating the mind-processes of a creative genius from the Elizabethan past by means of the colloquialisms of the present:

BDD-A26202 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:00:16 UTC)

> Elsinore – is that in Denmark? 'Hamlet, Prince of Finland' doesn't have quite the same gravitas.
> King – dead, killed by brother who marries mother and takes the throne. Laws of succession are quite odd in Denmark (not sure about Finland).
> Hamlet – son of dead king (hence 'Prince of Denmark') discovers his uncle murdered his father and married his mother to steal the throne. Probably drives him mad. Well, it would, wouldn't it?!
> How's he find out? Possibilities:
> - Hidden papers – never very satisfactory [...]
> - A magician tells him – ah, most plausible. Such things are common in the theatre.
>
> (Richards 8)

The "original notes for Hamlet" are followed by a sample of an early version of the script, "including a very different appearance by the ghost" (Richards 3)—"I am a Lord of Time, / Doom'd for all eternity to walk, / And for the day confin'd to my blue box" (Richards 10)—as well as "other observations, and previously unknown material, including several sonnets" and also comprising "early drafts of key scenes and moments" (Richards 1) from other plays, featuring a memorable rewriting of the familiar *As You Like It* monologue that exploits the fortuitous correspondence between the seven ages of man and the successive incarnations of the Doctor: "The cosmos is a stage [...] But Time Lords are required to play the greater part" (Richards 11).

Nevertheless, for all its additional insights into Shakespeare's life and writing, the inevitable conclusion of a side-by-side analysis of the television episode and this "strange collection of writings, snippets and musings" (Richards 3) seems to be that the "garbling" 45-minute "concatenation of Shakespearean histories and fictions" (MacRury and Rustin 126) in which "Shakespeare's literary genius is asserted, undermined, then ultimately reaffirmed" (Saidel 119) is considerably more effective in conjuring up a highly relatable image of Shakespeare as "both extraordinary genius and all-too-human man in the street" (MacRury and Rustin 110). Whereas its companion volume hails the stranger in a "blue box announced by all the sounds of hell itself" (Richards 8) as a purveyor of enchantment and inspiration, *The Shakespeare Code* pays unmitigated tribute to Shakespeare's unique ability to channel the magic of words:

> DOCTOR: The shape of the Globe gives words power, but you're the wordsmith, the one true genius. The only man clever enough to do it. [...] When you're locked away in your room, the words just come, don't they, like magic. Words of the right sound, the right shape, the right rhythm. Words that last forever. That's what you do, Will. You choose perfect words. Do it. Improvise.
>
> (Palmer)

Much like his succinct introduction of the playwright—"the man himself [...] the man with the words" (Palmer)—the Doctor's terse reaction—"You're William

BDD-A26202 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:00:16 UTC)

Shakespeare!" (Palmer) —to Shakespeare's lack of faith in his ability to thwart the Carrionites—"But what words? I have none ready!"—as well as his subsequent exhortation—"Come on, Will! History needs you!" (Palmer)—can be seen to contain an implicit reminder of Shakespeare's contribution not just to the literary canon but to culture as a whole, particularly to language itself.

Far from merely imagining Shakespeare's words "as a conduit for the world's salvation (Bermudez Bratans 150) by virtue of "theater's ability to transcend time and transform worlds" (Bermudez Bratans 151), the episode "plays with the established expectation of Shakespeare as the perfect wordsmith" (Saidel 114) and redefines absolute brilliance as the epitome of humanness rather than an exception to the rule: "Genius. He's a genius. The genius. The most human human there's ever been" (Palmer). While it might be tempting to regard this last remark as little more than a subtle compliment paid to humankind by the representative of perhaps the wisest and most powerful race in the universe (at least according to *Doctor Who* lore), there is also the possibility of reading the Doctor's praise in light of Harold Bloom's comments on Shakespeare's contribution to the actual crystallization of human nature: "Shakespeare, as we like to forget, largely invented us [...] We owe to Shakespeare not only our representation of cognition but much of our capacity for cognition" (Bloom 40). To continue this parallel between the best-known case of academic Bardolatry and the distinctly more plebeian but equally enthusiastic manifestation of the same sentiment in *Doctor Who*, it could be argued that the protean figure conjured up by the science fiction series provides a compelling reminder of the extent to which at least one of the "white European males" dismissed as dead by Foucault, Barthes and their numerous clones is still remarkably vital "compared to any living author whomsoever" (Bloom 39). By turns frolicsome and profound, occasionally grandiose yet unfailingly scintillating, perfectly at ease conversing with aliens and twenty-first century intellectuals alike and capable of eclipsing both the histrionic doctor and his seductive companion, the *Doctor Who* Shakespeare ultimately reasserts the magical power of well-chosen words, both borrowed and new.

In light of the observation that the brand of magic employed by the witch-like alien creatures entails using "the semiotic to bring down the phallocentric symbolic order" (Akgün 130), it is quite significant that the words of the ultimate dead white male only seem to become activated when the Doctor's black female companion joins in with an iconic quote from the work of a living female writer:

> SHAKESPEARE: Close up this din of hateful, dire decay, decomposition of your witches' plot. You thieve my brains, consider me your toy. My doting Doctor tells me I am not!
> LILITH: No! Words of power!
> SHAKESPEARE: Foul Carrionite spectres, cease your show! Between the points...
> DOCTOR: Seven six one three nine oh!
> SHAKESPEARE: Seven six one three nine oh! Banished like a tinker's cuss, I say to thee...
> MARTHA: Expelliarmus!

BDD-A26202 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:00:16 UTC)

DOCTOR: Expelliarmus!
SHAKESPEARE: Expelliarmus!
DOCTOR: Good old JK!

(Palmer)

Far from merely ensuring that no young audience member "remains in any doubt of Shakespeare's magical word-power" (Hills 163), or providing yet another example of collaborative authorship in action, the introduction of a cult word from the *Harry Potter* franchise as the final and decisive ingredient of the spell meant to confine the Carrionites back to their crystal ball prison also serves to connect past and present literature and magic as well as to efface whatever lingering distinctions "might have been felt about 'high' and 'popular' forms in 'The Shakespeare Code'" (MacRury and Rustin 119).

Unsurprisingly, *Doctor Who* does not engineer the first media encounter between the two sonorous names, already associated as chief coordinates of British patriotic pride by the fictional Prime Minister of *Love Actually*, in a speech which firmly embeds Shakespeare among popular culture icons: "We may be a small country but we're a great one, too. The country of Shakespeare, Churchill, the Beatles, Sean Connery, Harry Potter" (Curtis). Moreover, the *Harry Potter* franchise, thematically connected to Shakespearean lore by a strong vein of fantasy, had already paid tribute to *Macbeth*—the most representative Shakespearean text as far as dark magic is concerned—on both page and screen: the Weird Sisters, the nickname of the three Shakespearean witches supposedly inspired by the *Doctor Who* Carrionites (Sleight 203), becomes the name of a musical group familiar to "those who had grown up listening to the WWN (Wizarding Wireless Network)" (Rowling 341) in the *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* novel, while the permutation of lines from the memorable scene featuring the three crones gathered around the bubbling cauldron yields the song performed by the Hogwarts choir in the *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* film:

Eye of newt and toe of frog,
wool of bat and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,
lizard's leg and owlet's wing. [...]

Double, double, toil and trouble.
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.
Something wicked this way comes!

(Cuarón)

Intertextual connections aside, there is yet another important thread connecting Rowling to Shakespeare in terms of their similar gift for linguistic innovation. While the introduction of terms such as 'Muggle' and 'Quidditch' in the *Oxford English Dictionary* might seem an entirely negligible achievement in comparison with the hundreds of words and phrases Shakespeare added to the English language, Harry Potter aficionados could easily quote scores of Latin-inspired incantations and

BDD-A26202 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:00:16 UTC)

enough names of fantastic beasts and magical universe locations, products and phenomena to convince scholars of the scope—if not necessarily the relevance—of Rowling's contributions.

Should such arguments prove insufficient for the academic establishment and its ideas of appropriate cultural associations, it might be worth mentioning the extent to which writers of children's books and young adult fiction, such as Rowling, might have paved the way for a future in which the fate of the printed word is less apocalyptic than the gloomy predictions made throughout the second half of the twentieth-century seemed to suggest. Getting young readers to choose long prose narratives over computer games and comic books and, since the 2016 premiere of the *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* play, to abandon TV shows and DVDs for a night at the theatre is, one might say, a feat little short of magic and likely to yield results that go well beyond child literacy and an early experience of drama. Considering the likelihood of such popular texts having a significant contribution to the survival of the endangered Western Canon by raising generations of readers for whom exploring classical literature becomes a logical step after reading fantasy, it could be argued that having one of the numerous fictional incarnations of Shakespeare utter a Harry Potter spell and closing yet another intertextual circle is a perhaps not an entirely underserved tribute.

To return to the starting point of this analysis, it could be argued that the wealth of studies and scholarly articles reconsidering Shakespeare's work through the lens of modern appropriations, such as the ones approached in this paper, provides ample evidence of the additional insights "literary studies may gain when literature is studied as a particular cultural practice and works are related to other discourses" (Culler 47), as well as when literary researchers deign to acknowledge the fact that popular entertainment producers might be occasionally intent on exploring the same issues as their academic counterparts. Ultimately, the merits of a postmodern endeavour such as "The Shakespeare Code" go beyond leading audiences to consider "links between theatre, comic books, and television, between Shakespeare, Harry Potter" (Saidel 118) and a wide range of other apparently incompatible media. Moreover, the merit of such endeavour would also reside in its ability to bridge the gap between contemporary outlooks and the apparently far-removed Elizabethan past by pointing out similarities of experience and, above all, by conjuring up a vivid and relatable image of Shakespeare as a timeless and mutable creator rather than a fixed point in the canon and endorsing his plays as highly fluid and multifaceted texts, still relevant and perpetually open to new interpretations.

WORKS CITED

Aaron, Melissa D. *Global Economics: A History of the Theatre Business, the Chamberlain's / King's Men, and Their Plays, 1599-1642*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005.

BDD-A26202 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:00:16 UTC)

Akgün, Buket. "Brave New Words: Theatre as Magic in 'The Shakespeare Code.'" *The Language of* Doctor Who*: from Shakespeare to Alien Tongues*. Eds. Jason Barr and Camille D.G. Mustachio. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. 125–138.

Bate, Jonathan. *The Genius of Shakespeare*. London: Picador, 1998.

Bermudez Brataans, Delilah. "A Utopia of Words: *Doctor Who*, Shakespeare, and the Gendering of Utopia." *The Language of* Doctor Who*: from Shakespeare to Alien Tongues*. Eds. Jason Barr and Camille D.G. Mustachio. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. 139–154.

Blackadder Back & Forth. Dir. Paul Weiland. New Millennium Experience Company, 1999. Film.

Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon. The Books and School of the Ages*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994.

Burgess, Anthony. "The Muse." *Shakespeare's Other Lives: An Anthology of Fictional Depictions of the Bard*. Ed. Maurice J. O'Sullivan, Jr. Jefferson & London: McFarland & Company, 2005. 186–200.

Burt, Richard. "Shakespeare, 'Glo-cali-zation,' race, and the small screens of post-popular culture." *Shakespeare, The Movie II: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, Video and DVD*. Eds. Richard Burt and Lynda E. Boose. London & New York: Routledge, 2003. 14–36.

Cawley, Christian and Brian A. Terranova. *Ultimate Regeneration: The Incredible Resurrection of Doctor Who*. London: Kasterborous Books, 2011.

Chapman, James. *Inside the Tardis: The Worlds of* Doctor Who. *A Cultural History*. London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013.

Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Desmet, Christy. "Introduction." *Shakespeare and Appropriation*. Ed. Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer. London & New York: Routledge, 2002.

Fellows, Virginia M. *The Shakespeare Code*. Gardiner, MT: Snow Mountain Press, 2006.

"Hamlet: A Small Re-write." *The Second Coming*. Dir. Stephen Fry. Sadler's Wells Theatre, London. 18 Sept. 1989. Production.

Harmes, Marcus K. Doctor Who *and the Art of Adaptation: Fifty Years of Storytelling*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban. Dir. Alfonso Cuarón. Warner Bros., 2004. Film.

Hills, Matt. *Triumph of a Time Lord: Regenerating Doctor Who in the Twenty-first Century*. London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010.

Holland, Peter. "Afterword: What(ever) next?" *Shakespeare on Screen. Television Shakespeare. Essays in honour of Míchèle Wíllems*. Ed. Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin. Mont-Saint-Aignan: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2008. 271–278.

James, Brenda. *Henry Neville and the Shakespeare Code*. Bognor Regis: Cranesmere Press, 2008.

BDD-A26202 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:00:16 UTC)

Kollias, Hector. "Doctorin' the Bard: A Contemporary Appropriation of *Love's Labour's Won*." *Shakesqueer: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Ed. Madhavi Menon. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011. 194–200

Lanier, Douglas. "Shakespeare™: myth and biographical fiction." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*. Ed. Robert Shaughnessy Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 93–113.

Lodge, David. *Small World*. *An Academic Romance*. *A David Lodge Trilogy*. London: Penguin Books, 1993.

Love Actually. Dir. Richard Curtis. Universal Pictures, 2003. Film.

MacRury, Iain and Michael Rustin. *The Inner World of Doctor Who: Psychoanalytic Reflections in Time and Space*. London: Karnac, 2014.

Marlow, Christopher. "The folding text: *Doctor Who*, adaptation and fan fiction." *Adaptation in Contemporary Culture: Textual Infidelities*. Ed. Rachel Carroll. London: Continuum, 2009. 46–57.

Marotti, Arthur F. and Marcelle Freiman. "The English sonnet in manuscript, print and mass media." *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*. Ed. A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 66–83.

Purcell, S. *Popular Shakespeare: Simulation and Subversion on the Modern Stage*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Richards, Justin. *Doctor Who: The Shakespeare Notebooks*. New York: Harper Collins, 2014.

Rokison-Woodall, Abigail. *Shakespeare for Young People: Productions, Versions and Adaptations*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. London: Bloomsbury, 2001.

Saidel, Emily. "The Fictional Shakespeare in the Twenty-First Century." *Locating Shakespeare in the Twenty-First Century*. Eds. Gabrielle Malcolm and Kelli Marshall. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012. 108-121

Shakespeare in Love. Dir. John Madden. Universal Pictures, 1998. Film.

"The Shakespeare Code." *Doctor Who: The Complete Third Series*. Dir. Charles Palmer. BBC, 2007. Film.

Sleight, Graham. *The Doctor's Monsters: Meanings of the Monstrous in* Doctor Who. London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012.

Vedi, Sten F. *Elsinore Revisited. 'This Ientleman of Polonia': Polonius, a Character in Disguise*. Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2012.

Vickers, Brian. *Shakespeare, Co-Author: A Historical Study of Five Collaborative Plays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Wyse, Bruce. "Cultural Circulation and Circularities in *Doctor Who*: Bardolatry and the Time Vortex of Intertextuality." *Ruminations, Peregrinations, and Regenerations: a Critical Approach to* Doctor Who. Ed. Christopher J. Hansen.

BDD-A26202 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:00:16 UTC)