

## Shakespeare Revisited

By Jennifer Thatcher

Ralph Heimans is used to painting extraordinary people, whether royalty or prominent figures within the fields of music, law or government. He is therefore well used to dealing with those whose achievements or position require them to develop a public persona. With his portraits, Heimans encourages us to look beyond this public mask to reveal something more nuanced, more human, more like us. His previous choice of subjects, then, surely proved helpful when dealing with Shakespeare, whose plays scrutinise the psychological effects of power and desire, while his own life remains shrouded in mystery.

For *Shakespeare400*, the anniversary of his birth, Hogarth Press asked a number of internationally acclaimed authors to reinterpret one of Shakespeare's plays as prose fiction. Howard Jacobson, invited to rework *The Merchant of Venice*, suggested to Heimans that he paint accompanying portraits of these authors. In addition to Jacobson, five of them – Margaret Atwood, Tracy Chevalier, Gillian Flynn, Jo Nesbø, Anne Tyler – agreed to sit for him. The series was exhibited as *Shakespeare Revisited* at Shakespeare's Globe, London, in April 2016. The challenge was that, while all the authors had been assigned their Shakespearean play to rewrite, most had not yet completed their novels at the time that Heimans painted them. The resulting paintings, then, required Heimans to fill in the gaps with his imagination and incorporate his own interpretation of the play.

It was vital, in Heimans' view, to acknowledge the rich iconography, contemporary and historical, related to these authors and Shakespeare. The contemporary visual context includes the novelists' existing public images, as well as the popular film adaptations of the authors' novels, such as Tracy Chevalier's *Girl With a Pearl Earring* and Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*. The historical visual context includes Johannes Vermeer's 1665 painting of *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, the inspiration behind Chevalier's eponymous novel; and, more generally, the whole art-historical sub-genre of art associated with Shakespeare. This genre comprises portraits of Shakespeare himself; the art celebrated during the Bard's own lifetime, Caravaggio being the most famous across Europe; artworks inspired by Shakespeare's plays, particularly in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the height of which was John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery on Pall Mall; and finally, theatrical paintings of Shakespearean actors, such as Johann Zoffany's portraits of *David Garrick as Macbeth* and *Hannah Pritchard as Lady Macbeth* and *Charles Macklin as Shylock* (both 1768).

Heimans drew on all these sources when devising a concept for each painting. He typically spends weeks researching each subject, reading and listening to audio tapes as he works, and planning in advance all the compositional elements of his painting in order to maximise his often-brief time with the sitter. In this way, he pre-plans the sitting, the accessories he brings for them to wear, the props he adds, the settings he chooses or plans to invent and the idiosyncratic, historic frames he has sourced and often painstakingly restored for each one. The frame for Gillian Flynn's painting once held a painting by John Constable, for example.

London-based Howard Jacobson was the only author Heimans had previously met. However, in contrast to his royal paintings, for which he is allocated a fixed time slot (usually one hour) with his subject, the Shakespeare series allowed for more relaxed encounters, mostly in the sitter's own home. Jacobson recalls the extensive discussions he and Heimans had about *The Merchant of Venice*'s alleged anti-Semitism. Indeed, the intensity of that debate, seems to be captured in Jacobson's expression in the portrait, the light emphasising the furrows on his forehead and watery, downcast eyes – although, as befits a comic writer, Jacobson facetiously claims that the expression derives from a guilt-ridden inner debate about whether or not to eat a biscuit. The close cropping of Jacobson's head and shoulders against a black monochrome background emphasises that this is a psychological study.

The portrait is clearly recognisable as Howard Jacobson-the-contemporary-writer, but it also carries the suggestion that Jacobson has so internalised Shakespeare's play, physically and mentally, that he literally embodies its tensions. The evocative title *No sighs but of my breathing ...* is a line of Shylock's, in which he bemoans the fate of losing his daughter and his wealth. In selecting this quote, Heimans effectively casts Jacobson himself as Shylock. Indeed, the white scarf Heimans has added around Jacobson's neck suggests an Elizabethan ruff, while also casting highlights and producing a dramatic chiaroscuro contrast between dark and light, known as 'tenebrism'. It is no coincidence that Heimans chose a baroque painterly effect, since he enjoys imagining the kind of art that Shakespeare might have seen, or even been inspired by, in his own day. For this portrait, the intense expression, the austere background and sombre colour palette contrasted with strong highlights on the face all create a link with Rembrandt's uncompromising portraits and self-portraits – although he would only have been a boy when Shakespeare died.

It was no doubt also an irresistible coincidence that Tracy Chevalier was drawn to another great Dutch portraitist, Vermeer, for her earlier novel, *Girl With a Pearl Earring*. Heimans acknowledged their shared interest in Dutch Golden Age painting, by borrowing some of Vermeer's most recognisable tropes for Chevalier's portrait. As with Vermeer's portraits, Heimans set Chevalier in a domestic interior, her London home. We see her sat at a table, hand wrapped around a mug, the silhouette of her cat's back and tail clearly visible in the foreground. Like Vermeer, Heimans made abundant use of textiles as props and decoration to add texture, colour and light. The rich mottling of the cat's fur is echoed on the left-hand side of the portrait by the folds of an oriental rug. Vermeer used tapestries and rugs to similar framing effect, in, for example, *The Art of Painting* (1666), *The Procuress* (1656) and *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* (1663-4). (Heimans admits to having the rug delivered to Chevalier's house without her prior knowledge!) The strong primary colours – the vermilion rug with lapis blue accents picked up by Chevalier's striking eye colour –

are also those favoured by Vermeer to create strong contrasts. Finally, Heimans borrowed from Rembrandt and Vermeer the technique of *chiaroscuro*, here achieved through the sharply defined white accents of Chevalier's mug, fur collar and cuffs.

Chevalier drew on her childhood experiences for her version of Shakespeare's *Othello*, setting it in a 1970s primary school in suburban Washington. Heimans, however, preferred to make an ingenuous visual reference to the original Shakespeare play by adding an imaginary tapestry as a backdrop, serving both to mask the contemporary fittings of Chevalier's kitchen (she was sitting in front of her fridge) and to offer us a neat visual summary of the dynamic between the play's principal characters. The tapestry depicts Othello – a lone African among white figures in the manner of Renaissance paintings of the *Adoration of the Magi* – firmly gripping Desdemona's wrist, whose arm is in turn being held protectively by an anxious Emilia behind her, while Iago looks shifty at her other side.

Jo Nesbø's portrait is also set in a highly stylised domestic space, in fact his Oslo home. The Norwegian writer, in his characteristic hoodie, seems to come right to the foreground of the painting, as if the bookcase and open doorway to his bedroom behind him were part of a stage-set. His youthful clothes and rock-star good looks are offset by the wrinkles on his well-worn face, the contrast accentuating his haunting, brooding expression. The painting's landscape format adds a more contemporary, cinematic aspect and creates enough space around the figure to include intriguing narrative elements. Eerie candlelight in the bedroom emphasises the white sheet of the un-made bed and casts a subtle glow on the moon picture above it that infers that it is night-time. What is Nesbø doing up at night, fully clothed, clearly restless?

As a bestselling crime writer, it is no surprise that Nesbø chose *Macbeth* to interpret. As with Heimans' other portraits, the viewer alternates between seeing Nesbø as himself, and also as a Shakespearean character, here of course the guilt-ridden Scottish King, Macbeth himself. Indeed, Heimans has given a Scottish baronial twist to what was a more typically Scandinavian décor: a throne-like chair on the right, the impressive library of antiquarian books and the Gothic-looking frame (itself from a Scottish castle). To heighten the *noir* aspect of this portrait, Heimans pays homage to Caravaggio – with his suitably murderous reputation – specifically, his candle-lit, theatrical paintings that frequently use red cloth as a dramatic accent.

The title of Nesbø's portrait ... *A Walking Shadow* ... is an extract from Act 5, Scene 5 when Macbeth had just learned of his wife's death and bitterly laments the brutality and transience of life:

*Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more.*

In the context of these lines, then, the candles in the painting take on existential symbolism, while the red lining of Nesbø's hoodie, coupled with his dagger necklace, can only reference one thing: blood. Macbeth has blood on his hands and must live with the guilt. In casting Nesbø as Macbeth, Heimans invites us to consider Nesbø's own state of mind. What psychological effect does writing about crime have on an author? In writing about serial killers, murders and other violent crimes, what insights might Nesbø have gained about the human propensity for evil?

If Heimans created the impression of a stage-set for Nesbø's painting, for Anne Tyler's portrait he created the illusion of the painting as a window through which she is looking out, a large house with its grand front porch reflected behind her. The *trompe l'oeil* wooden windowpane in the picture echoes the 'real' Venetian *pastiglia* (moulded) frame, creating a frame-within-a-frame. Furthermore, the window-mirror and the double frame could be seen within the tradition of *mise-en-abyme*, the technique, made famous by Velasquez in his 1656 royal portrait *Las Meninas*, of creating an infinite reflection within a painting (or a story-within-a-story, as used by Shakespeare, most famously in *Hamlet*). Who is the real voyeur here; who is looking at whom?

Known for writing about American suburban life, and particularly the Baltimore area in which she has lived and written about for half a century, Heimans exploits her reputation as a reclusive writer, casting her as a curtain-twitching neighbour, head slightly tilted, observing the goings-on around her. Her demure hairstyle and sober, high-necked turtleneck jumper (its ruff collar, as with Jacobson's portrait, a subtle Elizabethan reference) together with her shrewd, penetrating expression lend her something of a Miss Marple-type allure, someone you wouldn't suspect of spying. Yet, like the window-mirror illusion, all is not what it seems. Tyler is anything but meek. Her contribution to the Shakespeare series, a reworking of *The Taming of the Shrew*, is brilliantly caustic. In *Vinegar Girl*, Tyler recasts the suitor Petruchio as Pyotr, a Polish lab assistant to her father, who offers him his reluctant daughter Kate – the 'shrew' – in marriage to solve visa problems. That the main characters (other than Kate's self-obsessed, indulged sister Bunny) inspire affection despite their obvious flaws, is the huge charm and achievement of Tyler's novel.

Heimans had a clear art-historical concept for Gillian Flynn, who has chosen to retell *Hamlet* for her novel (to be published in 2021). For this portrait, Heimans explicitly cast Flynn herself as tragic Ophelia from *Hamlet*, who goes mad following the murder of her father by her lover Hamlet. His inspiration was visibly Sir John Everett Millais' celebrated depiction of the scene, *Ophelia* (1851-2). In Millais' painting, she lies open-mouthed in a stream, singing, weighed down by her long dress and appearing to lose her grip on the delicate flowers she is holding – soon to drown. *Ophelia* is arguably as famous for the lengths Millais went to achieve realism in his painting as the literary subject matter, particularly the fact that Millais

required his long-suffering model, Elizabeth Siddal, to sit for lengthy spells in a bath, resulting in her catching a severe cold. Happily, Heimans traded the bath for a floral carpet in Flynn's Chicago home, having brought Flynn a bunch of flowers to hold. The exuberant botanical backdrop points us to a second art-historical source: the flower-filled meadow and flowing locks of Flora in Botticelli's celebrated allegory *La Primavera* (c. 1477-1482). The link is not arbitrary: Botticelli was revered by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

Heimans made the macabre connection between Ophelia's death-wish and that of anti-heroine Amy in Flynn's thriller *Gone Girl*, this latter's death-drive, however, both suicidal and murderous. It seems that Heimans has added a touch of Amy to Flynn's portrait. As might Amy, then, Flynn-as-Ophelia looks provocatively at the viewer, a slight smile playing on her lips; although lying down, she is very much alive and certainly not a martyr.

Known for her dystopian fiction and particularly *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood fittingly chose the apocalyptic *The Tempest* as her Shakespearean play. She set her version in a prison – the play given to prison inmates to perform as part of an educational drama project – exploiting the situation's potential for black humour. In her portrait, Atwood also looks directly at the viewer, her arched eyebrows and piercing eyes suggesting that she is assessing the viewer as much as we her. Nonetheless, her face is luminous, her grey head of curls like a halo emerging from the dark background with its just-visible shadowy landscape. Like the other novelists she wears contemporary clothing given a baroque edge by her scarf and exaggerated cuffs. With both hands she holds a wooden staff (actually, Heimans' painting stick), its shadow creating a thick stripe across her face, and giving her a saintly attitude in the manner of St Jerome in the Wilderness – an effect also reinforced by the gnarled tabernacle frame, that was used in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Italy for private devotional images.

The stick is a clear reference to Prospero's magical staff in the original play. Given that Prospero is often viewed as a stand-in for Shakespeare himself, this comparison acknowledges Atwood's formidable reputation and the respect in which she is held in contemporary literature. Atwood's novel, on the other hand, is defiantly titled *Hag-Seed*, from the insult levelled at Caliban by Prospero. It is tempting to read the title as an attempt to reclaim that misogynist term 'hag'. After all, Atwood has claimed that *The Handmaid's Tale* was partly inspired by a New England woman (possibly a relative of hers), who was wrongly accused of being a witch in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

With this series, Heimans celebrates the astonishing inventiveness of these six authors and the creative risks they took in rewriting Shakespeare. The portraits allow the author's choice of play to reveal something of their own worlds and their personality, especially as so many of the writers took inspiration from episodes in their lives. Like the new versions of the plays, Heimans' paintings borrow from the past – the Old Master techniques and composition; the pre-Raphaelite romantic tropes – but never surrender to pastiche. The portraits don't hide their contemporary references, whether clothing and accessories, homeware or architecture, but give them a subtle historical inflection to suggest a continuum between past and present. Fiction and portraiture are as relevant and demanding today as they were in Shakespeare's time, offering multi-layered insights into even the most private and enigmatic personalities.