

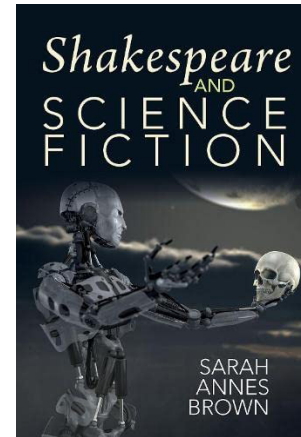
Shakespeare and Science Fiction, by Sarah Annes Brown

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Sarah Annes Brown. *Shakespeare and Science Fiction*. Liverpool UP, 2021.
Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies, 71. Hardcover. 224 pg.
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Sarah Annes Brown is a scholar both of Shakespeare and of Science Fiction, among other literary subjects. She is especially interested in “patterns of influence and allusion,” according to her Anglia Ruskin University bio page. While no doubt many scholars are interested in Shakespeare, SF, and literary influence—and indeed, much has been written about Shakespeare’s presence in and influence on SF—Brown has provided an important addition to the study of Shakespeare in/ and SF by giving us, as the book’s back cover blurb reports, “the first extended study of Shakespeare’s influence on the genre.” This book is essential reading for anyone interested in how Shakespeare has informed (and in some cases, how his works have been informed by) SF, both because of her own insights and because of the expertise with which she weaves together earlier scholarship on the subject.



This compact book (I would have been happy to have had an additional hundred pages to read) consists of an introduction that speaks to the reason Shakespeare may be of abiding interest to SF authors (beyond his general cultural capital and ubiquitous influence), followed by seven chapters exploring the interpenetration of Shakespeare and the following SF subcategories and conventions: time travel, alternate history, dystopian fiction, contact with aliens/travels to space, science and magic (a chapter focusing primarily on *The Tempest* [1610/11] and its SFnal elements/presence), posthumanism (including constructed beings such as robots—one section and illustration notes echoes of Hamlet holding Yorick’s skull with Chewbacca holding C-3PO’s head), and post-apocalyptic fiction. Throughout the book, Brown provides extensive references to prior work on Shakespeare and SF—indeed, she perhaps directs readers more to earlier texts than she builds her own analyses, which I will address further below—and cites a remarkable range of (mostly) SF texts. She identifies SF, and specifically written SF, as her primary interest, but does provide occasional discussion of non-SF and, more extensively and insightfully, the Shakespearean presence in filmic form, especially *Dr. Who* and *Star Trek*, with other notable examples (e.g. *Forbidden Planet* [1956]) thrown in. The main thematic through line is the tension between Shakespeare being depicted as a transcendent figure (perhaps most notably in works in which even aliens idolize Shakespeare, but in other contexts as well, such as Shakespeare’s frequent presence as a cultural touchstone in post-apocalyptic SF, or in alternate history stories in which

his presence or absence changes the course of history), and a more skeptical/revisionist view of Shakespeare as having a reputation that exceeds his actual worth. She refers recurrently to Borges's paradoxical construction of Shakespeare in "Everything and Nothing" (1964) as exactly that.

Brown tackles many of the obvious candidates for consideration, from books with Shakespeare actually in the title, such as Clifford D. Simak's *Shakespeare's Planet* (1976; I was a bit disappointed that she did not pick up on the fact that the figure of Oop is an evident echo of V. T. Hamlin's famous time-travelling caveman, who encountered Shakespeare's Macbeth in a story in 1953) to such obscure texts as John E. Muller's (Lionel Fanthorpe) 1965 novel, *Beyond the Void*, a book I had never heard of. Even readers familiar with Shakespearean appearances and echoes in SF will probably find references here to texts about which they know little. That said, and as noted above, Brown also limits herself, generally, to SF, so one might quibble with which exceptions she chooses to address. I doubt anyone would argue against considering Neil Gaimin's use of Shakespeare in his *Sandman* (original series 1989-1996, with several ancillary projects published since), as Brown does, though Shakespeare appears in only a handful of stories (albeit key ones), if for no other reason that the fact that in 1991, issue 19, which offers a take on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595/96), won the World Fantasy award for short fiction. However, one might argue that the comics series *Kill Shakespeare* (2010-2014, with several subsequent tie-in series), by Anthony Del Col and Conor McCreery, would have merited consideration, given its premise, and despite its aesthetic limitations. For entirely personal reasons, I would also have liked to see Brown say a bit more about Phyllis Gotlieb's use of *The Tempest* in her 1976 novel *O Master Caliban!*.

The nature of the book, though, as well as its length, make comprehensiveness and deep dives, if not impossible, certainly difficult. Even within her defined limits, Brown has a lot of territory to cover, so she frequently offers only brief commentary on many works (few texts are given more than a handful of pages) and frequently directs readers to more detailed studies of the texts she references. Brown primarily hits the high points of how the works she considers reflect her thesis, with a fair bit of plot summary (often necessary, given the number of texts touched on; no reader is likely to be familiar with all of them) and relatively little detailed analysis or close reading. The book provides a very useful overview of significant texts that have invoked Shakespeare, often providing valuable insights, and Brown provides readers with the tools to track down studies of individual works.

Despite Brown's scholarly rigor, this book is written in a clear and accessible style, and with no small degree of wit. While noting the difficulty SF authors face in trying to create a plausible voice for Shakespeare when they try to depict him, Brown herself demonstrates an admirable facility with language. While the book's primary audience is academic, this book would be accessible to undergraduate students and probably advanced high school students, so it could serve as a useful recommended reading text for such audiences. Consequently, it would be a worthy acquisition for university, college, and even high school libraries, though its price point will probably dissuade potential readers from purchasing a copy.

Dominick Grace is the non-fiction reviews editor for *SFRA Review*. Occasionally, he takes advantage of that role to claim a book for himself. He also belongs to the group of those with a scholarly interest in both SF and Shakespeare.